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MIT WINS DESIGN COMPETITION FOR ELON MUSK'S HYPERLOOP



MIT student engineers won a competition to transform SpaceX and Tesla Motors co-founder Elon Musk's idea into a design for a Hyperloop to move pods of people at high speed.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was named the winner Saturday after a competition among more than 1,000 college students at Texas A&M University in College Station.

The Hyperloop is a high-speed ground transport concept proposed by Musk to transport "pods" of 20 to 30 people through a 12-foot diameter tube at speeds of roughly 700 mph.


ERL P
HYPE

More than 100 university teams presented design concepts to a panel of judges in an event that began Friday.

Delft University of Technology from The Netherlands finished second, the University of Wisconsin third, Virginia Tech fourth and the University of California, Irvine, fifth.

The top teams will build their pods and test them at the world's first Hyperloop Test Track, being built adjacent to SpaceX's Hawthorne, California, headquarters.

Online: **http://hyperloop.tamu.edu/**





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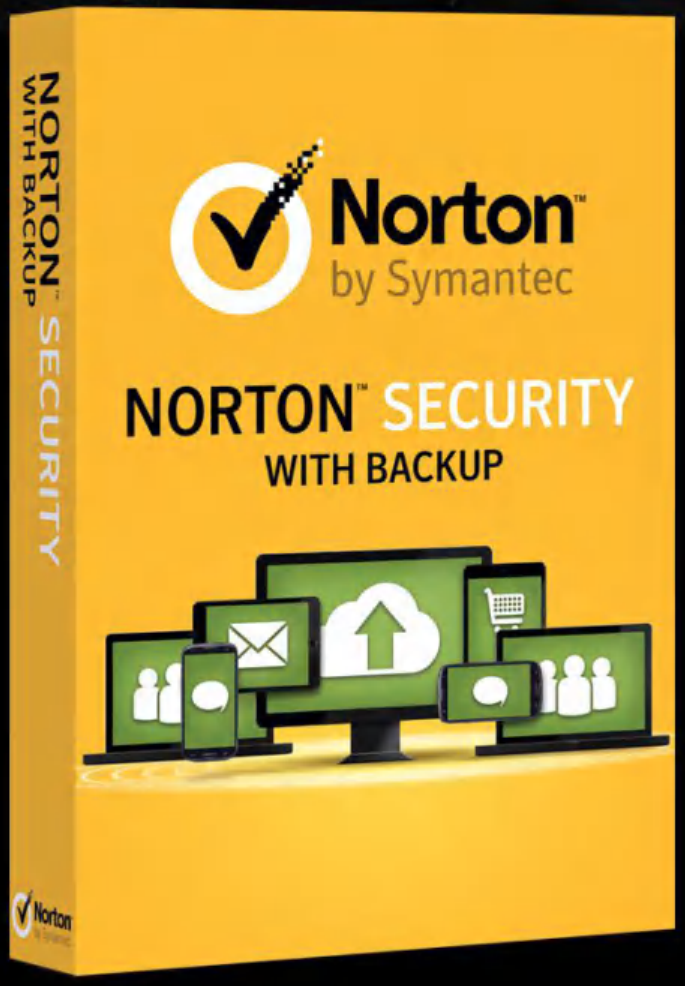
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EU AND US REACH NEW DATA-SHARING AGREEMENT

The European Union and the United States struck a deal Tuesday over data-sharing that will allow the likes of Facebook and Apple to continue sending people's information across the Atlantic - but a legal challenge to the pact is widely anticipated.

The sides had been trying to forge an agreement since October, when Europe's top court ruled against the previous pact - known as Safe Harbor - amid concerns that Europeans' personal data stored by companies in the U.S. might be exposed to spying by U.S. intelligence agencies.

The new deal, once put in place, potentially brings an end to a period of uncertainty that had raised the prospect of legal challenges by individuals across the 28-country EU worried about privacy.

"Our people can be sure that their personal data is fully protected," said Andrus Ansip, the European Commissioner responsible for the digital single market. "Our businesses, especially the smallest ones, have the legal certainty they need to develop their activities across the Atlantic."

Ansip said the new framework, which will be known as EU-US Privacy Shield, will ensure the "right checks and balances" for European citizens and added that it "offers significant improvements" to the previous deal, which had been struck in the early days of the Internet at the turn of the century.

"This solution is much better than the one we had in the year 2000," he said.

Under the new deal, there will be an annual joint review of the data-sharing pact, with the first expected sometime next year. The U.S. has also promised to appoint a new official - a so-called ombudsman based at the State Department - responsible for following up on complaints upon referral from EU data protection officers.

"It's Safe Harbor with teeth," said Dyann Heward-Mills, Head of Data Protection at the legal firm Baker & McKenzie in London. "I think this is good for business certainty and consumer trust."

In its October decision, the European Court of Justice declared the Safe Harbor pact was invalid because it did not adequately protect consumers when their data was stored in the U.S., in light of the spying revelations made by Edward Snowden, a former contractor at the U.S.'s National Security Agency. Snowden's revelations had prompted the complaint to the court from an Austrian law student, Max Schrems.

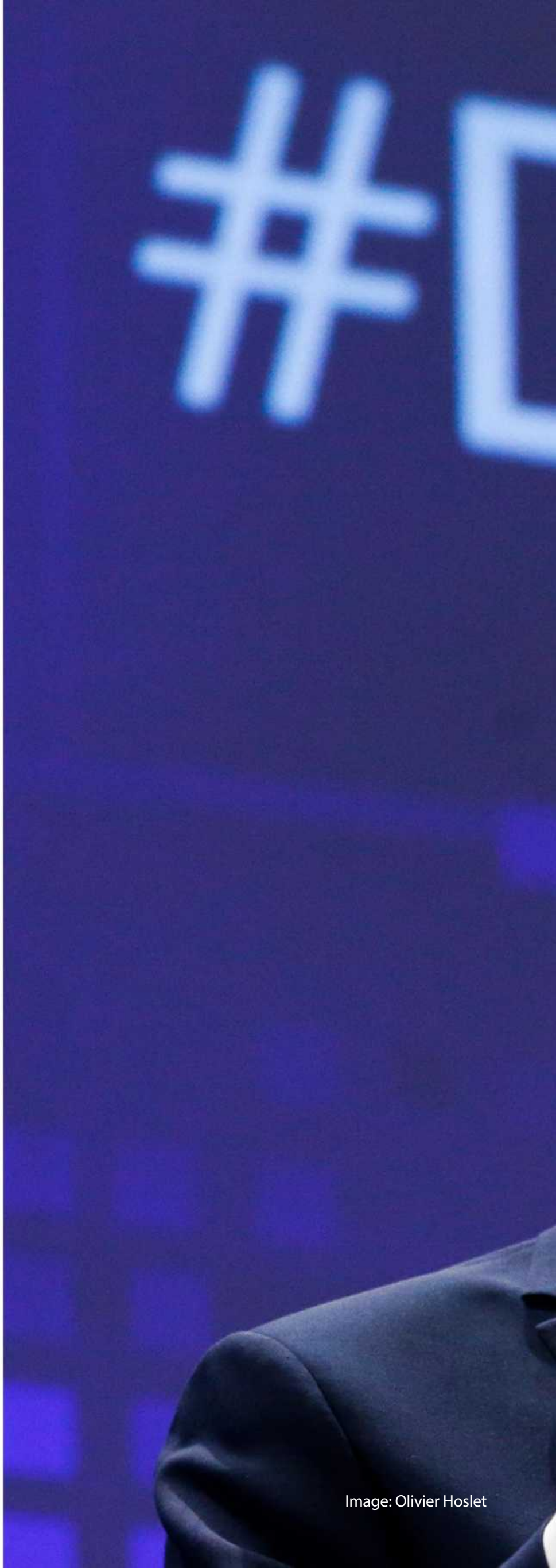


Image: Olivier Hoslet


Digital



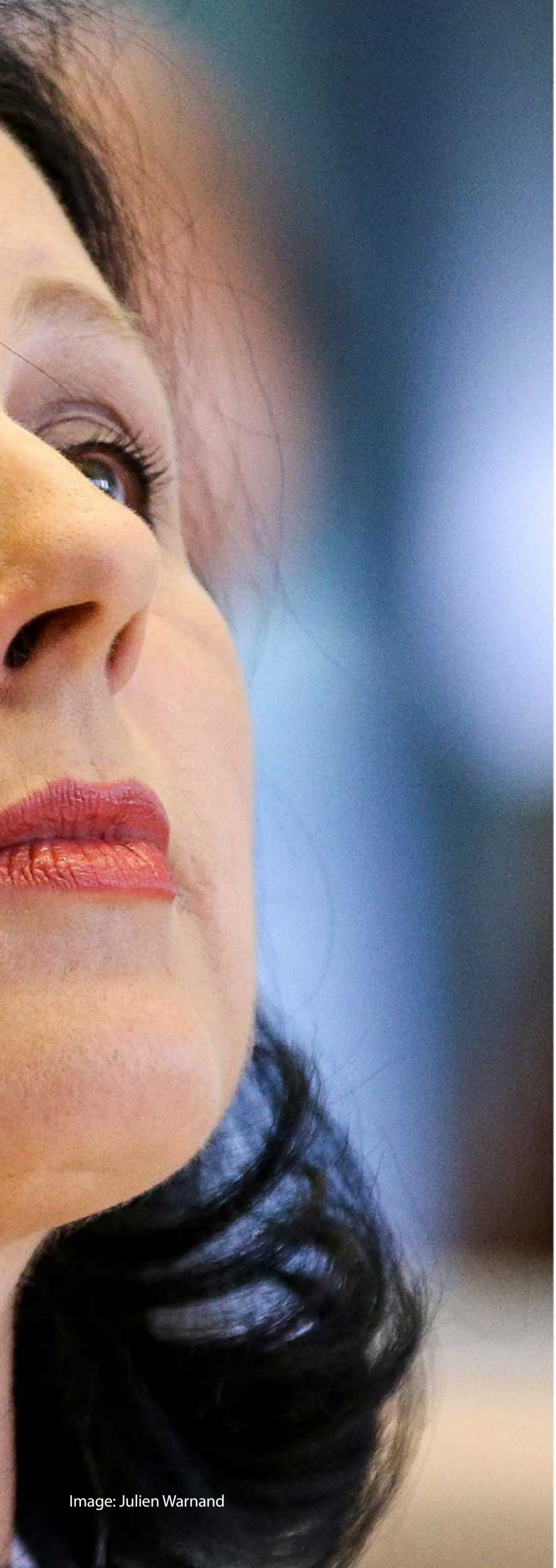


Image: Julien Warnand

The pact, which had been used by around 4,500 companies, had allowed the easy transfer of data from the EU by having U.S. companies promise to provide privacy protections equivalent to those in the EU. The EU court's ruling that the pact was invalid opened up the possibility that data privacy officers across the EU might be inundated by complaints by consumers worried about their privacy.

Vera Jourova, the European Commissioner for Justice, said the deal is a landmark as for the first time ever the U.S. has given the EU "binding assurances" that the access of public authorities for national security purposes "will be subject to clear limitations, safeguards and oversight mechanisms."

Also for the first time, she said EU citizens will benefit from "redress mechanisms" in this area.

"The U.S. has assured that it does not conduct mass or indiscriminate surveillance of Europeans," she said.

Jourova added that she's confident that the new arrangements will withstand any future court challenges as the discussions used the court ruling to help in the "formulation" of the new arrangements.

She estimated it could take up to three months to make the deal binding, while U.S. Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker said she expected it to be in effect in a matter of weeks. Pritzker said "it's been a long road but we've turned the corner."

Given the role cross-border data-flows play in a modern economy, the news of the deal was met with relief by many.

"We welcome the agreement, which will provide strong privacy safeguards for consumers and legal certainty for the thousands of companies that depend on trans-Atlantic data flows," said Christian Borggreen, international policy director at the U.S.-based Computer & Communications Industry Association.

Others were a bit more cautious.

The Washington, D.C.-based Center for Democracy & Technology, which did a quick analysis of the announced framework, said in a statement that despite the framework's improvement for EU citizens' data privacy it would likely face trouble in court.

"Absent reform of U.S. surveillance law, it is highly unlikely that the Privacy Shield agreement will be deemed sufficient by the (European) Court of Justice," said Jens-Henrik Jeppesen, the body's director of European affairs.



He called on the U.S. Congress to swiftly move to reform its surveillance law and for EU member states to narrow their own surveillance laws and practices to also be more aligned with international human rights norms.

And Sophie In't Veld, spokesperson for data protection for the ALDE alliance of liberals in the European Parliament, said a legal appraisal of the safeguards offered by the U.S. is needed.

"It is highly doubtful that they offer meaningful protection to European citizens, or if they meet the standards set by the European Court of Justice," she said.

She noted that the assurances seem to rely exclusively on political commitment, instead of legal acts so "any change in the political constellation in the U.S. may undo the whole thing."

Image: Sebastiaan ter Burg

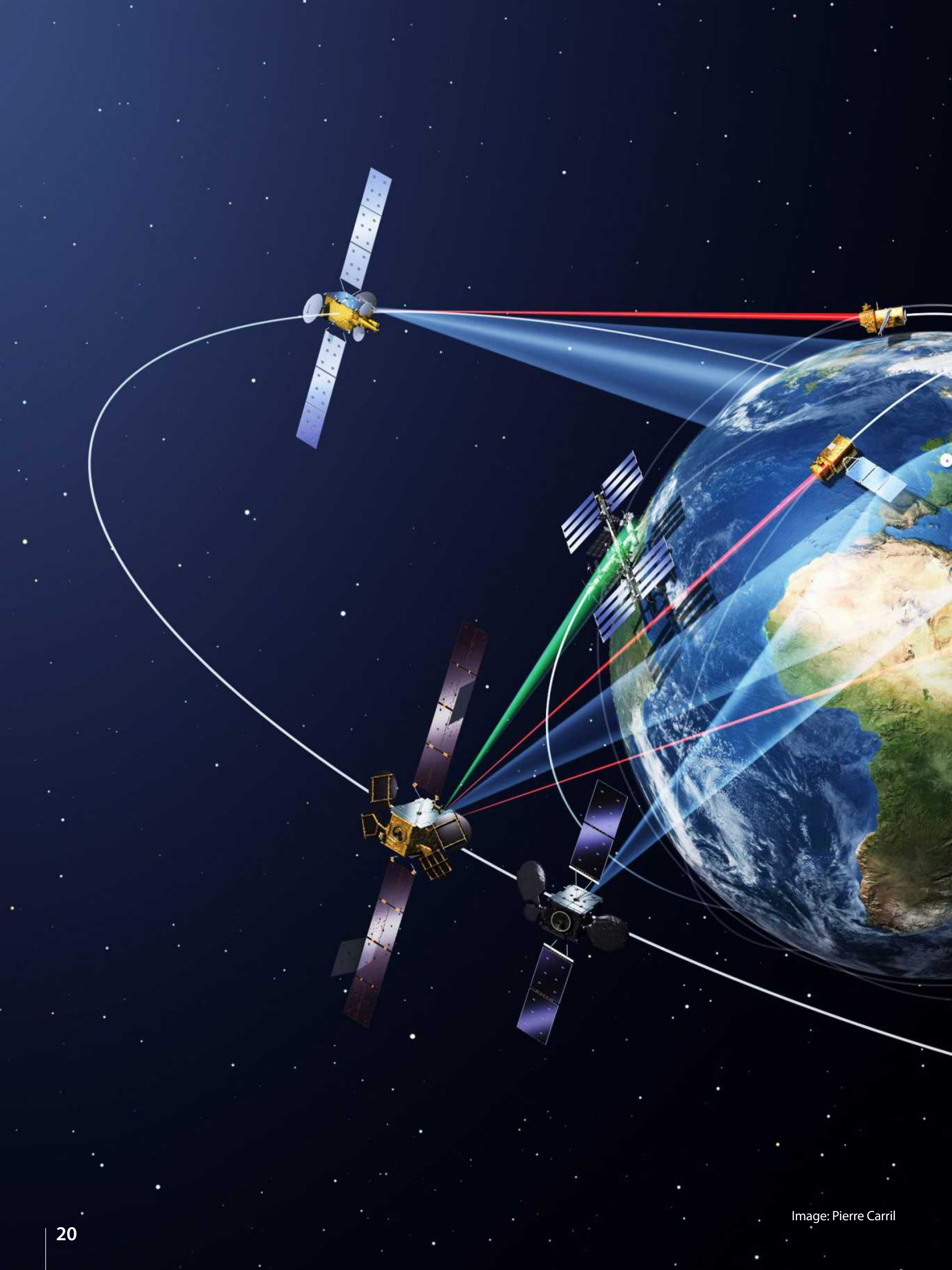
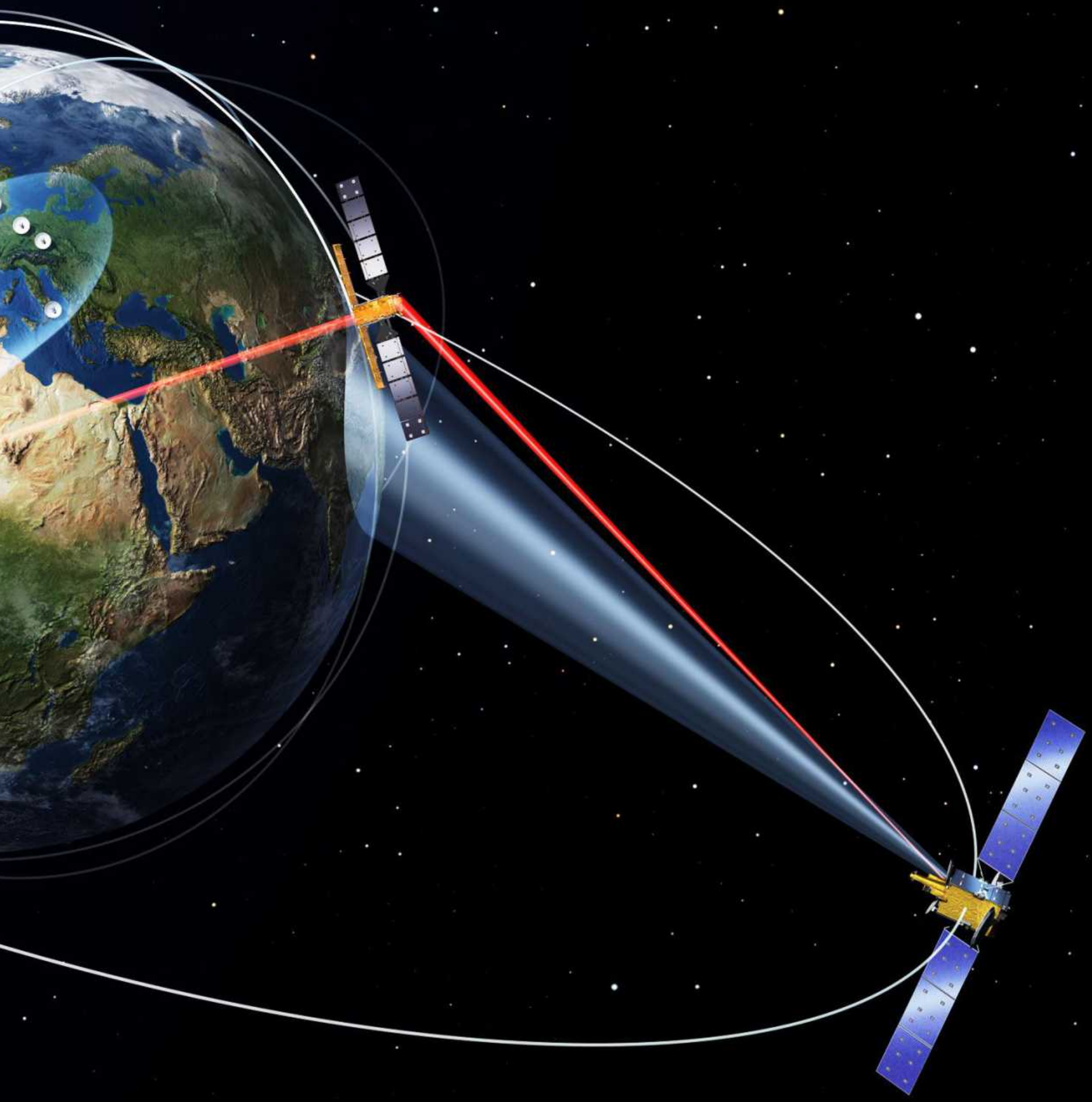


Image: Pierre Carril

EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY LAUNCHES NEW LASER COMMUNICATIONS HUB

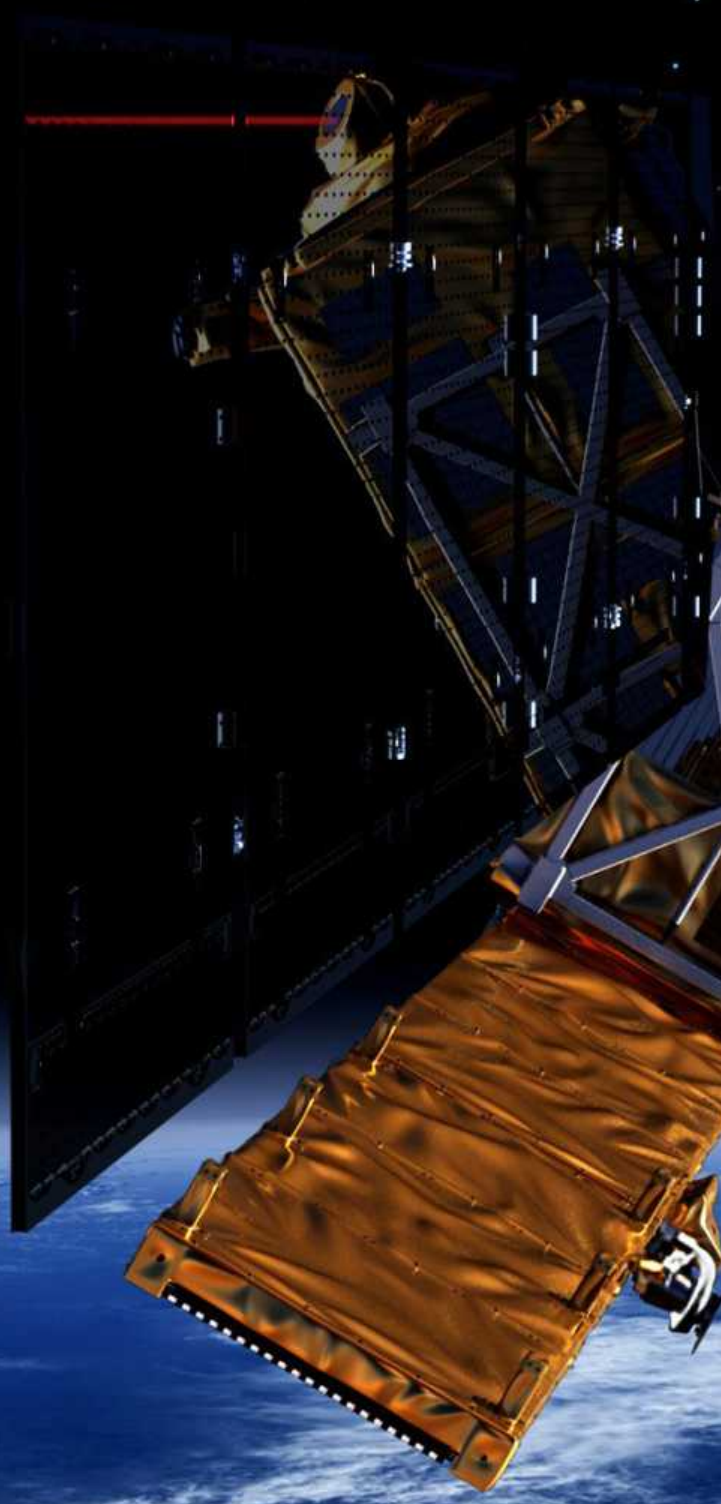


The European Space Agency says a new laser terminal has been launched into orbit as part of wider efforts to develop Europe's first optical communications network, a system able to monitor natural disasters and other catastrophes.

The European Data Relay System terminal, launched Friday from Kazakhstan, was released from its host satellite Saturday morning.

The stationary hub will collect information from surveillance satellites and relay it using an ultra-fast laser data connection to the ground.

The agency and its partner, Airbus Defense and Space, say they will begin testing the system in the next few days and start delivering services to customers in the summer. WA second data relay node is scheduled for launch next year, a third in 2020.





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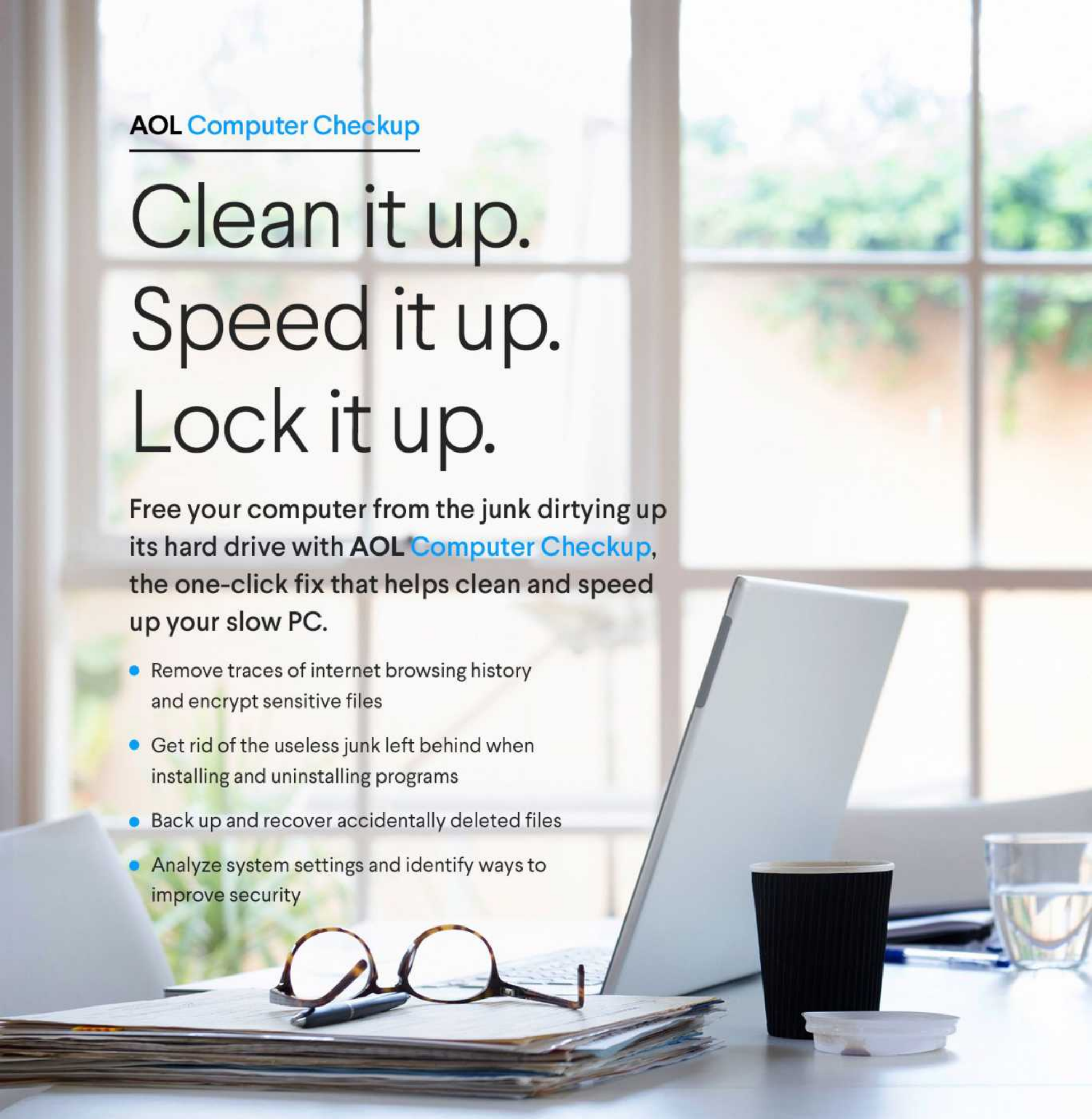
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FOX'S AMBITIOUS 'GREASE' UPS THE LIVE TV MUSICAL ANTE

"Grease," the 1950s-set musical romp that was a stage and screen smash in the 1970s, is rebooting as a Broadway-meets-Hollywood hybrid for its 21st-century television close up.

Fox's "Grease: Live" (7-10 p.m. EST Sunday) aims to revisit the puppy-love story of Sandy and Danny, played by Julianne Hough and theater veteran Aaron Tveit, with a supercharged blend that weds theater's immediacy and cinematic flair.

Instead of one stage, the broadcast is using several indoor sets and outdoor studio locations to create Rydell High School, including its gym and exterior, along with teen hangouts including the Frosty Palace soda shop. A small army of camera operators will be deployed to capture the action in close-up and longer shots.

Some of the 20 cameras will be taken offline - almost unprecedented in live TV - and shifted among nearly four-dozen positions in the production, which is being shot at the Warner Bros. lot in Burbank, Calif. Cast members will be on the move too, relying on golf carts to rush them from one scene to another during commercial breaks.

Rain was predicted Sunday, but umbrellas are at hand and the show will go on, producer Paramount Television said.

"Grease: Live" is building on the current small-screen fascination with musicals, which started with NBC's live telecasts including "The Sound of Music" and "The Wiz" and may include "Hairspray," also from NBC, and, from ABC, a possible movie update of "Dirty Dancing."

In a Friday night dress rehearsal performed before an eager friends-and-family audience, the

intricate puzzle came together precisely, starting with an elaborate, continuous-shot opening with Jessie J singing "Grease (is the word)" as she roamed the studio and ending with an outdoor carnival scene.

"We'll do it straight through, like we'll do it Sunday for 143 million of our closest friends," director Thomas Kail ("Hamilton") told the audience at the start. He is overseeing the stage direction, with Alex Rudzinski serving as the live television director.

(Kail was indulging in a flourish of ratings hyperbole - "The Sound of Music," NBC's biggest live-musical draw, was seen by 19 million viewers.)

After the rehearsal wrapped on time, a beaming Hough flashed a thumbs-up sign to the crowd.

In that three-hour window, cast members and an ensemble of dancers and singers frantically switched costumes and sometimes hairstyles and makeup as they pivoted from one scene to the next in real time. The TV musical includes Vanessa Hudgens as Rizzo, Carly Rae Jepsen as Frenchy, Keke Palmer as Marty, Ana Gasteyer

as Principal McGee and Mario Lopez as slick DJ Vince Fontaine.

Original "Grease" stars Didi Conn, who played Frenchy, and Barry Pearl, who co-starred as Doody, are back in cameos.

A smiling Conn, decked out in a waitress outfit, drew applause and shouts from the audience when she dropped by the gym set pre-rehearsal.

Other crowd-pleasing moments included a performance by guest stars Boys II Men of "Beauty School Dropout"; a cheerleader challenge between Hough's Sandy and Elle McLemore's Patty, and a cleverly-staged sequence that moves a Palmer solo of "Freddy My Love" from a girls' sleepover to a USO stage show and back again.

And no surprise here: Big cheers greeted the high-energy dance contest scene in which Hough, Tveit and the entire cast got to show off their moves and the audience rocked out to "Born to Hand Jive."

Online:
http://www.fox.com/

DRONE SCHOOLS SPREAD IN CHINA TO FIELD PILOTS FOR NEW SECTOR

Joysticks at their fingertips, the mostly male students packing the classroom lift their virtual helicopters into the air, part of a new cottage industry that's sprung up in China: drone pilot schools.

China is already the world's biggest drone manufacturer, churning out remote-controlled flying machines that range from 3-D urban mappers to tear-gas spraying models for police. But it lacks qualified pilots to fly them.

Young men in particular are flocking to drone schools such as TT Aviation Technology Co., one of more than 40 in China, hoping to land a potentially lucrative job in an exciting new field.

TT Aviation offers a two-week intensive course for 8,000 yuan ($1,200) where students learn regulations and how to pilot using simulators and real drones. At the end of the course, they can try to earn the license required by China's Civil Aviation Administration to operate drones that are heavier than 7 kilograms (15 pounds) and fly higher than 120 meters (400 feet).

Image: Carlo Allegri


iOSD mini

Xu Honggang, 24, believes the license will open doors to piloting jobs that make at least 5,000 Chinese yuan per month ($780), higher than average. Some experienced pilots bring in double that amount, he said.

"I want to build my own company with drone services," Xu said one recent afternoon next to a grassy field where his instructor demonstrated basic moves with a small radio-controlled helicopter. "I like to work for myself. This is a new and popular line of work."

The opportunities appear promising. More than 10,000 new pilots are needed this year across all industries in China, but only 1,000 pilots now hold licenses, said Yang Yi, the general manager of TT Aviation, which also manufactures and sells drones to private and public sector customers.

"The drone pilot and the car driver are the same: They both need systematic skill training and regulated studying to make sure everyone knows the rules before the real operation," she said.

Drones are touted as game-changers in a range of industries, including agriculture, logistics, film production and law enforcement.

The sector has gotten support from the central government, which is keen on promoting robotics and automation to sustain economic growth as labor costs rise. Chinese firms are making inroads producing unmanned machines beyond industrial use as well. Baidu, the Beijing-based search engine, is developing a self-driving car while DJI, a Shenzhen-based drone maker valued by U.S. investors at $8 billion, has cornered more than half the world consumer drone market.



So far, more than half of TT Aviation's products are used in agriculture. China has vast farmlands, and there is a high demand for drones to be used in pesticide spraying because the labor force is shrinking even as labor costs rise, said Yang.

The company said police will use drones for patrols, while utilities use them for maintaining electricity infrastructure or mapping pipelines.

The Shandong Qihang Surveying and Mapping Technology Company has used photographs taken by its drones to build vast urban databases and 3-D models of cities. Every building can be catalogued, with information about the people and businesses behind every window stored in a database - a valuable technology for government bodies like the census bureau, urban planners and public security agencies, said company vice president Wu Haining.

"With oblique photograph technology and through cooperation with the government, people will be able to check any uploaded personal information in a room from any building in our 3-D map," said Wu, whose company also produces surveillance drones with five cameras.

The rapid development of new types of drones requires a pool of trained and specialized drone operators, Wu said.

Even as drones offer law enforcement sharply expanded capabilities, authorities in China, as in many other countries, are scrambling to regulate their use. The country is now beginning to set nationwide regulations on where they can fly, which are applauded by many in the Chinese industry.









"We need pilots with licenses, because safety is the biggest concern in the operation of drones. Although we have insurance, we still need strict regulations for studying and training to avoid any incidents," Wu said.

On a recent afternoon, a group of drone-flying aficionados tried out their models in the outskirts of Beijing near the city's 6th Ring Road, a highway around the city about 15 to 20 kilometers (8-12 miles) from the city center. The capital requires permission to fly a drone inside that ring.

"This is only a toy for entertainment, I won't use this for any other purpose," said Sun Xiaoqiang, a Beijing resident who has been flying drones for two years, when asked about the regulations.

"I have no bad intentions, it's only for entertainment, so I think they should open a certain airspace for us."

SOMETHING NEW TO WORRY ABOUT CONNECTED TOY SECURITY

Your smartphone or tablet is most likely pretty secure - not perfect, maybe, but generally unlikely to be hacked or to store, say, your email where other people could read it.

The same can't be said for any Internet-connected toys you may have purchased for your kids. Recently discovered security flaws in a pair of such toys highlight just how badly the toy industry has neglected such problems, theoretically exposing kids to online threats.

While major crimes teeming from the hack of a connected toy haven't yet surfaced, some experts argue that it's only a matter of time.

Kids "aren't expected to be Internet security experts and neither are their parents," said Tod Beardsley, security research manager for Rapid7 Inc., the Boston-based cybersecurity firm that published the toy-security research on Tuesday.




2:11

Rapid7 researchers examined the Fisher Price Smart Toy, an interactive stuffed animal for children aged 3 to 8 that connects to the Internet via Wi-Fi. They also took a look at HereO, a GPS smartwatch that allows parents to track their child's location. In both cases, they found that the toys failed to safeguard children's information such as their names and in the case of the watch, their location, storing it on remote servers in such a way that unauthorized people could access it by masquerading as legitimate users.





After researchers informed the manufacturers of the flaws, the companies quickly fixed the problems.

Mattel Inc., which owns the Fisher Price brand, released a statement Monday emphasizing that it has no evidence that anyone actually stole any customer information because of the flaw. Eli Shemesh, chief technology officer for Cyprus-based hereO, released a statement saying that security remains paramount for his company, adding that the security flaw was fixed quickly and before the watches started shipping to customers.

Those security problems are far from unique, said Mark Stanislav, Rapid7's manager of global services and the researcher who discovered the flaws. Reports of connected-toy vulnerabilities have been rife in recent months, a trend he expects to continue to worsen as more connected toys hit the market.

Toy makers need to be "building security in at the development phase," Stanislav said in a statement.

Like many connected devices, the Fisher Price toy runs a version of Google's Android operating system, the same software that powers many smartphones and tablets. Beardsley, however, said toy makers don't have the same commitment to security that a major tech company would have.

"I would be shocked if any Android-based toy didn't have any problems," he said.

Apple, whose iPhones and iPads are the biggest rivals to Android devices, doesn't license its mobile software for use in toys.

Toy-related security problems began to grab headlines late last year, when kid's tech maker VTech announced that one of its databases had been hacked, exposing the names, ages and genders of more than 6 million children who used the company's toys.

As the number of connected toys continues to grow, so will the number of hackings, says Bridget Karlin, managing director of Intel Corp.'s Internet of things group. Intel's chips power a slew of connected devices, including a GPS smartwatch for kids, similar to the HereO, that's set to go on sale later this year.



Image: Guy Ivesha





Karlin says that while the odds of any particular toy being hacked may be very low, most of the attacks are random. That means building in security from the ground up, starting at the silicon level.

In the case of the Fisher Price toy - which is sold as a stuffed bear, panda or monkey and retails for about $100 - the researchers found that the toy's software and applications weren't appropriately verifying who was trying to access its information. That could theoretically expose a child's name, birthday, spoken language and gender.

Of course, those tidbits of information aren't necessarily secret. But hackers could theoretically amass enough of them to create a phishing scheme aimed at financial fraud or identity theft down the road. In theory, the information could also be used to pull off the abduction of a child, though experts say the chance of that remains slim.

The same flaw also could allow an attacker to effectively take control of the device to do things such as change the account information, or monitor whether a child is playing with it or if an adult is using the related mobile app, the researchers said.

The HereO smartwatch is marketed as a safety device for children aged three to 12 and creates a kind of social network that's restricted to invited family and friends.

The brightly colored watch has both a cellular and GPS connection, allowing parents to monitor a child's location through a mobile app. Features include messaging, location alerts and a panic button. The watch, which costs $179 in the U.S. plus a $4.95 per month monitoring fee, recently started shipping to customers around the world.

Rapid7 says its researchers found a way attackers could trick the watch into adding them onto a given family's account. That would give them access to the entire family's location history and profile details and even the ability to message parents or their kids.




20:14


20:14


20:14

FROM SAG AWARDS TO SUNDANCE, DIVERSITY MAKES A COMEBACK

In a flurry of wins at the Screen Actors Guild Awards and the Sundance Film Festival, diversity made a comeback.

Over just a few hours Saturday night, the SAG Awards and Sundance showered their honors on a parade of performers and films that presented a stark contrast to the crisis that has plagued the Oscars. Shortly after the screen actors handed out awards to Queen Latifah, Uzo Aduba, Viola Davis and Idris Elba (twice), Nate Parker's Sundance sensation "The Birth of a Nation," a drama about Nat Turner's slave rebellion, swept the festival's awards.

The two ceremonies, in Los Angeles and Park City, Utah, offered a night of reprieve from weeks of rancor over systemic inequality in the movie business and a second straight year of all-white Academy Award acting nominees.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to diverse TV," said Elba in his third trip on stage as a presenter at the SAG Awards. His first two were to accept awards for his supporting performance in the Netflix child soldier drama "Beasts of No Nation" and for his lead performance in the BBC miniseries "Luther."

Soon thereafter, at Sundance, Parker took the festival's grand jury prize and its audience award.

"Thank you, Sundance, for creating a platform for us to grow, in spite of what the rest of Hollywood is doing," said Parker, whose directorial debut sold for a record sum to Fox Searchlight Pictures.

The SAG Awards top honor, best ensemble in a film, went to the newspaper drama "Spotlight," which came into Saturday badly in need of some momentum. The ensemble award had seemingly come down to "Spotlight" or Adam McKay's high finance tale "The Big Short," which last week took the Producers Guild's top award. The win assures a competitive and unpredictable Oscars finale, with "The Martian," "The Revenant" and "Mad Max: Fury Road" also in the mix.

"No way," said Mark Ruffalo, one of the stars of "Spotlight."

He praised the writer-director Tom McCarthy and co-writer Josh Singer for their purposeful accuracy in penning the journalistic procedural about the Boston Globe's reporting on sexual abuse by Catholic priests. The two, he said, "took every single opportunity to tell the truth. They didn't take any cheap way. It was always the truth."

Elba made no direct reference to the uproar that has swept through Hollywood in the last two weeks, which might have been less severe had he been nominated by the Academy Awards, as many expected. But it was on the minds and tongues of seemingly everyone in Los Angeles' Shrine Auditorium.

Accepting the most outstanding ensemble award in a comedy series for Netflix's "Orange Is the New Black," co-star Laura Prepon gestured to the cast of the prison comedy standing behind her.

"Look at this stage," said Prepon. "This is what we talk about when we talk about diversity."

SAG winners for individual performances the last three years have corresponded with eventual Academy Award winners. Thus Leonardo DiCaprio ("The Revenant"), Brie Larson ("Room") and Alicia Vikander ("The Danish Girl") all cemented their status as Oscar favorites. Each won, as expected.

But supporting actor will differ this year. The category's perceived favorite is Sylvester Stallone for the Rocky sequel "Creed." Stallone, though, wasn't nominated by the screen actors.

Actors make up the largest branch of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, which is why the SAG Awards are a closely watched harbinger of the Oscars. But the Screen Actors Guild is massive by comparison: some 160,000 members to the academy's 6,000-plus. Voting for the SAG Awards, which concluded Friday, also overlapped with the widespread debate over the industry's inclusiveness that followed Academy Awards nominations.

Latifah gave one of the evening's most stirring speeches while accepting the award for most outstanding female performance in a TV movie or miniseries for HBO's Bessie Smith tale "Bessie."

"I hope that anyone out there who does not come in the package that people say you should, keep fighting for it," said Latifah. Backstage, Latifah added: "Hopefully our

business will continue to supply the demand that people are asking for. The people want it. Give it to the people."

Aduba, accepting her second straight SAG Award for best actress in a comedy in "Orange Is the New Black," praised creator Jenji Kohan for making "a show that reflects and represents so many people."

For the third time, "Downton Abbey" won best ensemble in a drama series. Best actor in a TV comedy went to Jeffery Tambor for the acclaimed Amazon series "Transparent." Kevin Spacey won his second SAG Award for "House of Cards."

The great comedian Carol Burnett accepted the SAG lifetime achievement award from presenters Tina Fey and Amy Poehler. Recalling the uphill battle she faced, Burnett remembered being warned that "comedy variety is a man's game." She then dramatically shook her head and mouthed: "No."

Davis, who in September became the first African American to win best actress at the Emmys, won again for her performance in "How to Get Away With Murder." She reminded that "diversity is not a trending topic."

"All of the actors of color I know don't place any limitations on themselves," said Davis. "So regardless what is going on with the academy, what is going on with Hollywood, they will find a way to be excellent. We always have and we always will."

FACEBOOK ANNOUNCES STRICTER POLICY ON FIREARMS SALES



Facebook says it's cracking down on online gun sales, announcing Friday a new policy barring private individuals from advertising or selling firearms on the world's largest social network.

The new policy applies also to Facebook's photo-sharing service Instagram. It comes after gun control groups have long complained that Facebook and other online sites are frequently used by unlicensed sellers and buyers not legally eligible to buy firearms.

Facebook "was unfortunately and unwittingly serving as an online platform for dangerous people to get guns," said Shannon Watts of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, a group that launched a public campaign to convince the social network to change its policies two years ago.

Image: Mark Ralston



Watts said her group has found numerous cases of felons and minors who were able to buy guns on the site, including two cases in which the buyers used the guns to slay others. Representatives of two gun-owner rights groups, including the National Rifle Association, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Facebook had announced some restrictions on gun sales and advertising in 2014, saying it would block minors from seeing posts that advertised guns. But the social network did not ban private sales at that time.

Licensed firearms retailers can still promote their businesses on Facebook, but they aren't allowed to accept orders or make sales on the site.

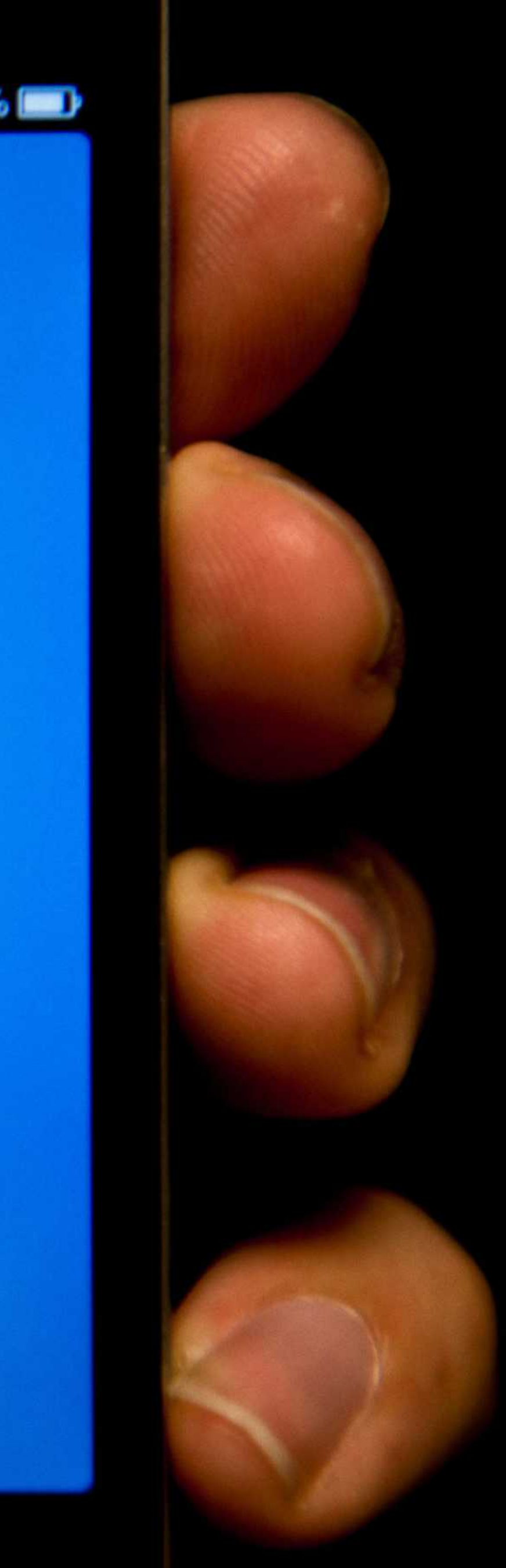
A Facebook Inc. spokeswoman said the new policy arose from the company's review of its rules following its recent efforts to encourage new forms of commerce on the site. Facebook expanded its digital payments service last summer, allowing users of its Messenger service to send electronic payments to other individual users.

"Over the last two years, more and more people have been using Facebook to discover products and to buy and sell things to one another," Monika Bickert, who oversees Facebook product policies, said in a statement. "We are continuing to develop, test, and launch new products to make this experience even better for people and are updating our regulated goods policies to reflect this evolution."

Watts, however, said her group had urged Facebook to take stiffer measures, during a series of low-key contacts.



Image: Brendan Smialowski



"They were very, very open to our thoughts on policy and to the research we have been compiling," Watts said. "I think they definitely saw this was an issue, but an incredibly complicated issue. I think that's why it's taken two years."

Facebook, which is based in Menlo Park, California, cited the need to balance free expression with public safety when it announced the 2014 policy change in a blog post. At the time, some gun-control advocates complained Facebook didn't go further, while news reports quoted a spokesman for the National Rifle Association who declared victory over what he called a campaign to stifle constitutionally protected speech.

The latest policy drew praise Friday from Everytown for Gun Safety, a group formed by the merger of Watts's organization with another group started by former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and from a leader of the Brady Campaign and Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

"It is simply too easy for virtually anyone to buy any gun they want online without a Brady background check," said the Brady group's president, Dan Gross. "Facebook just took an important step in addressing that challenge and we call on others to follow suit."

APPLE STARTS TO GET SERIOUS ABOUT 3D

INCREASING PASSION FOR VR AND AR AT CUPERTINO





VIRTUAL REALITY AND AUGMENTED REALITY ARE KEY AMBITIONS

Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are certainly nothing new in the consumer technology space, as shown by the emergence of headsets like the Google Glass and Oculus Rift, together with all manner of associated developments. Now, with the news that Apple has acquired the motion-capture company behind the animated characters in the latest Star Wars film, it seems that the boys and girls at Cupertino are starting to get similarly serious about all things 3D.

There may have been many a joke about what Apple has in common with the Star Wars universe since the release of The Force Awakens - **the designer of the new stormtrooper armor, Michael Kaplan, even citing the relentlessly simplifying Sir Jony Ive design language as an influence** - but those links became even more real in late November.

That was when it emerged that Apple had purchased the Zurich-based startup Faceshift, the technology of which enabled the 3D, non-human characters in the latest J.J. Abrams-directed record-breaker to imitate the facial impressions of an actual actor. But despite what the headlines may suggest, the bigger story isn't the connections between Apple and Star Wars, but instead what the iPhone maker intends to do with its latest acquisition's expertise, which - as often tends to be the case with Apple company purchases - is far from clear.



Image: Alexei Sidelnikov



SERIES OF ACQUISITIONS GETS THE RUMOR BLOGS GOING

Naturally, an Apple spokesperson gave little away on the subject of what was planned for Faceshift's technology, giving the traditional company line that "Apple buys smaller technology companies from time to time, and we generally do not discuss our purpose or plans."

Just as predictable as that statement, however, is the rumor that has sprung up regarding what the acquisition means for Apple in the months and years to come, not least given that it has purchased various similar firms in recent times. These include, **last May, the augmented reality startup Metaio**, **the artificial intelligence specialist Emotient in early January** and - **towards the end of last month - another AR firm, Flyby Media**, which previously worked with Google on the search giant's Project Tango initiative.

Indeed, Project Tango is just one more example of how Google has ploughed ahead into a world of 3D technology that Apple has thus far been reluctant to publicly commit itself to. However, it is far from uncommon for Apple to make only general or even negative comments about a certain field prior to its entry into the market. Furthermore, as we have seen from such examples as the iPad and Apple Watch, the firm has long been comfortable to debut its own version of a product long after more pioneering rivals have taken the risks associated with theirs.

MUCH SPECULATION AS TO WHAT APPLE WILL DO NEXT

Inevitably, during Apple's earnings call for 2016's first quarter, **CEO Tim Cook was quizzed on what Apple made of virtual reality**, with his answer suggesting an increasing appreciation of its potential within and beyond the walls of its Cupertino headquarters. "I don't think VR is a niche", he remarked, in opposition to a common criticism of the technology. "It's really cool and has some interesting applications."

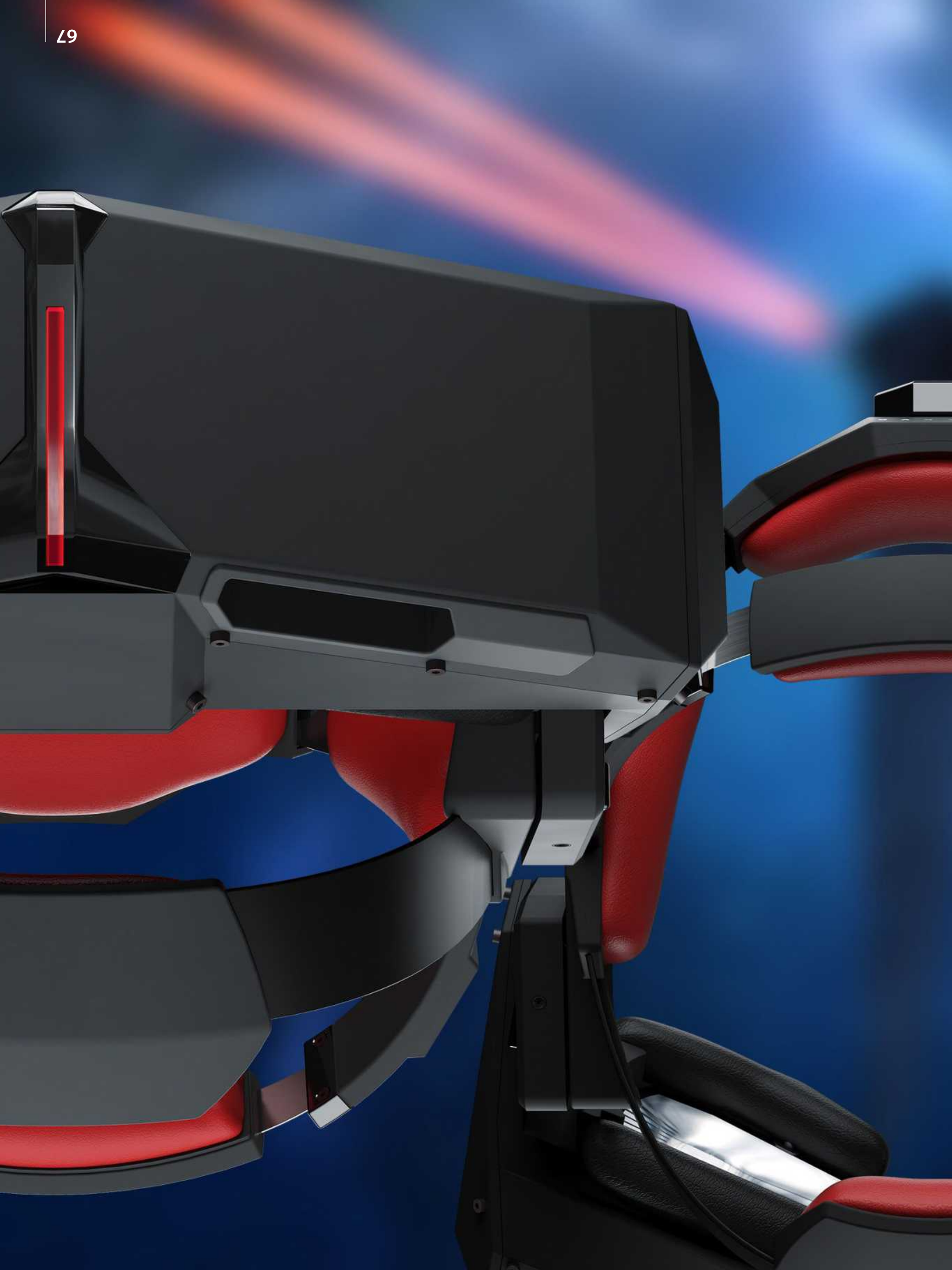
Decoding what Apple actually intends to do in the worlds of VR, AR and 3D technology in general, however, remains much more difficult. One obvious question is whether Apple may use the technology to develop an actual hardware product, or whether it may instead simply provide a powerful software platform on which others can do so.

There seems to be much skepticism among observers that Apple would adopt the former strategy, as perhaps best summed up by 9to5Mac writer Chance Miller, who said that he didn't "necessarily see Apple entering the market of developing its own virtual reality headsets", but instead creating a platform akin to the company's existing HomeKit or TVKit. He posited that any virtual reality hardware that Apple did eventually develop would not in any way resemble Google Glass, which he said "arguably proved that the average person doesn't want a piece of hardware attached to their face at all times."



Image: Borodin photography





3D, VR AND AR 'COULD BE USED IN EXISTING APPLE DEVICES'

It seems that much of the focus on Apple's ambitions for 3D technology is therefore on how it could be incorporated in various exciting ways into the existing Apple ecosystem. From iPhones and iPads to Macs and the Apple TV, pretty much all of the Cupertino firm's most popular current devices have been mentioned as potential conduits of such technology.

After all, besides the well-publicized major acquisitions of the aforementioned AR companies, Apple has - according to the Financial Times - recently **added Doug Bowman, the Director of the Center for Human-Computer Interaction at Virginia Tech, to its staff**. His academic research interests in 3D interface design extend to his writing a book on the subject, while he has also worked on VR immersion. However, it is Bowman's experience in the creation of Minority Report-esque 3D interfaces that has prompted much chatter that he could be put to work on AR car control systems - just imagine the use of 3D maps in an in-car navigation system, for example.

But there has also been much talk about how such technologies could be applied to the Apple TV, with Miller describing the latter device as representing "a huge opportunity for virtual reality as far as gaming goes." Or perhaps Apple might bolster its support for 3D movies on future generations of the TV? After all, **even the current model was recently revealed to incorporate support for stereoscopic 3D content**. Both





games and movies in 3D look set to be a major growth area for Apple TV in the future.

What about the possible applications of 3D technology on the iPhone? Well, one recent report from South Korea has suggested that **Apple could be working on micro-LED technology capable of displaying holograms that are visible to the naked eye**, without the need for special glasses. The iNews24 website said that this display of 3D holographic images would be made possible by the use of other specialized hardware and software.

If the above idea sounds outlandish, bear in mind that **Apple has previously been awarded a patent for an "interactive holographic display device"** that would enable users - through multi-touch gestures - to interact with 3D objects shown on the display of an iPhone, iPad or Mac. Such a system would trigger certain actions through interpretation of the user's hand gestures.

An additional suggested use for 3D technology on the iPhone has been for facial recognition that would identify people in a picture as soon as it is taken. Or on the subject of facial recognition, perhaps as soon as a user sits down in front of their Apple TV or Mac, it could immediately recognize them and automatically load up their own personalized content, apps, music, TV shows, movie suggestions and more, removing the need for any manual action?







APPLE AND 3D - IT'S REAL

The above are just some of the suggestions that have been made as to what Apple could do with 3D, VR and AR technology, all of which are helping to make this an extremely exciting new frontier for the Cupertino company. Google may have already long embraced these fields, but if there's any firm that is well-placed to finally make VR and AR mainstream technologies, we fully expect Apple - on the basis of its formidable track record in this regard - to be that company.

by Benjamin Kerry & Gavin Lenaghan

BESTING BOWIE AND ADELE, PANIC! AT THE DISCO HITS NO. 1

Debuting at No. 1 is certainly an accomplishment, but bumping artists like David Bowie and Adele down the music charts has Panic! at the Disco's Brendon Urie simply gobsmacked.

"That's insane. I mean, to be in same sentence as anyone like that - I'm not worthy," Urie said. "I was just floored!"

"Death of a Bachelor," released last month, topped the Billboard 200 chart and sold 190,000 equivalent albums in its first week, according to Nielsen Music.

It's the fifth album and first No. 1 for Panic!, of which Urie is the only remaining original member after his band mates decided to leave the group over the years.

But the 28-year-old vocalist is loving life as a solo act. He co-wrote the album's songs and plays most of the instruments on the pop-rock project.

"It's amazing because I don't have to compromise or I don't have to argue as much," he said.

In an interview last week with Techlife News, Urie discussed doing things his way on "Death of a Bachelor," touring with Weezer and his eclectic inspirations, from Beyoncé to Frank Sinatra.

TLN: What did you think when you heard you knocked Bowie's album from the top spot?

Urie: I'm conflicted about it. I'm happy, but man, just losing a legend, yeah, I mean, that's unreal but I'm glad that at least I had a chance to pop in there, get on people's radar. David Bowie had so many hits, too; it's not like I'm hurting his career by any means.

TLN: How confident were you about your solo debut?

Urie: There's always nerves when you're releasing something. These are all very personal to me. Every song is autobiographical. It's about something I experienced or want to experience, so it's all very close to my heart.

TLN: Who were some of your inspirations on the album?

Urie: Queen, Bruce Springsteen. ...There's a pretty good, in my opinion, a good mash up of Beyoncé and Sinatra on the title track. ...I wrote the song actually trying to make a Sinatra song ...and then I hit this wall, just writing-wise, where I was getting so frustrated. ...So I took a break from it and went back to this beat I had worked on like months before and it kind of had this 'Drunk in Love,' Beyoncé-kind of feel. ...It was just like a happy accident.

TLN: Has Beyoncé heard the track?

Urie: I wonder. I doubt it, but I would love to show her (and say), 'You inspired this, Queen B!'

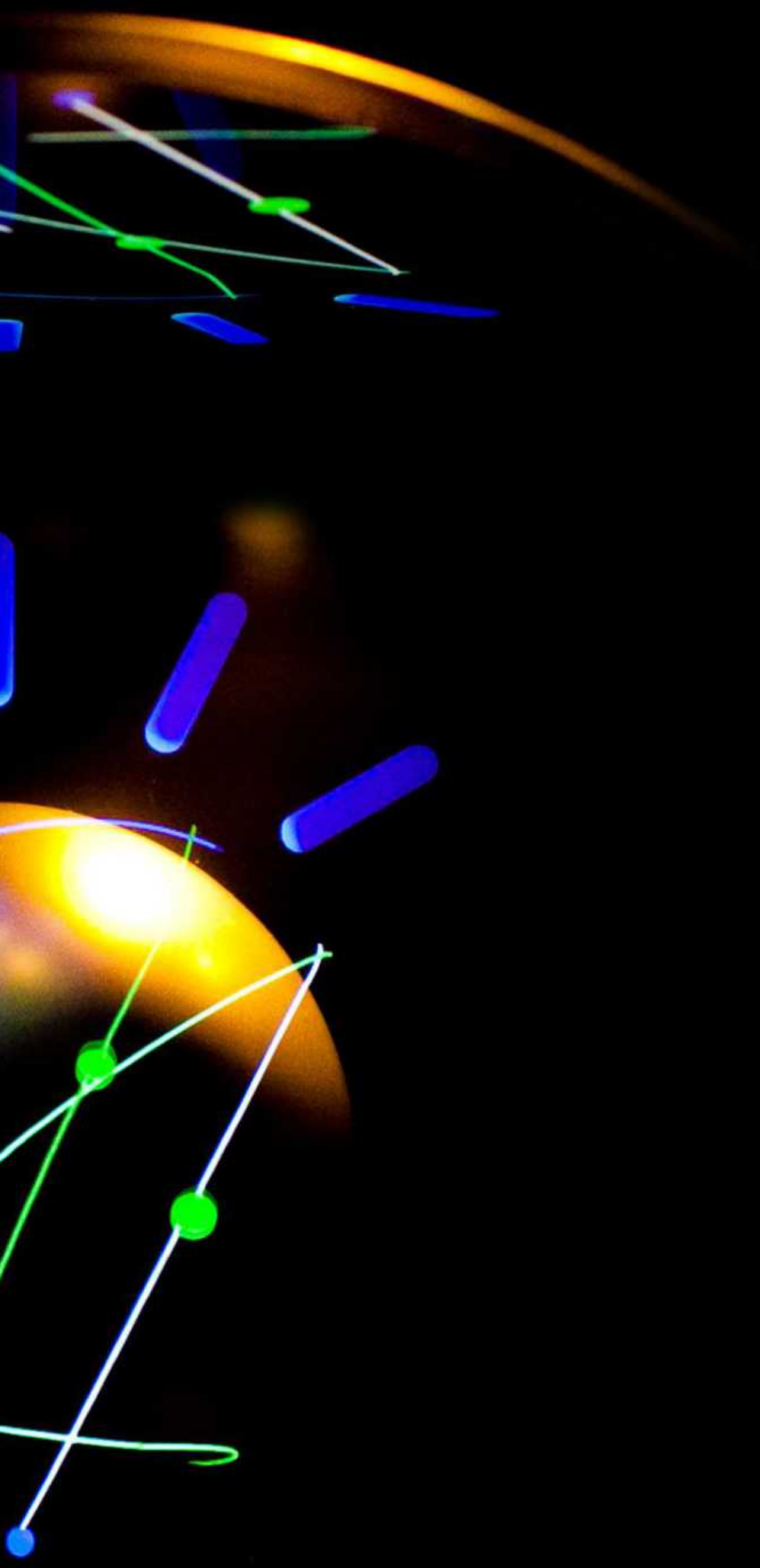
TLN: What can fans expect from your summer tour with Weezer?

Urie: That is really crazy to say. Anytime I say it, it doesn't feel real. I don't think it's gonna feel real until the first week of the tour where we've established set times and hang out. ...But knowing that we're going to be touring together was just like my childhood fantasies come true. ...Ten-year-old me would just be crying right now, flipping out, ecstatic. I might cry (onstage). No promises, but maybe.

Online:
http://www.panicatthedisco.com/



Image: Andrew Spear



IBM NAMES WEATHER CO. CHIEF AS WATSON'S NEW BOSS

IBM says former Weather Co. CEO David Kenny will be the new boss for Watson, the Jeopardy-winning "cognitive computing" service that's a central element of CEO Virginia Rometty's campaign to find new revenue for the struggling tech giant.

Watson is a computing system that uses machine-learning and natural-language skills to analyze and find trends in data from a wide variety of sources. IBM has been promoting Watson and related technology as a powerful tool for use in health care, retailing and other industries.

The Armonk, New York, company announced last year that it was buying The Weather Co., including its websites, apps and data platform, for an undisclosed sum. The cable-TV Weather Channel was not part of the deal and is continuing to operate independently.


POWER7
POWER7
POWER7
POWER7
WATSON

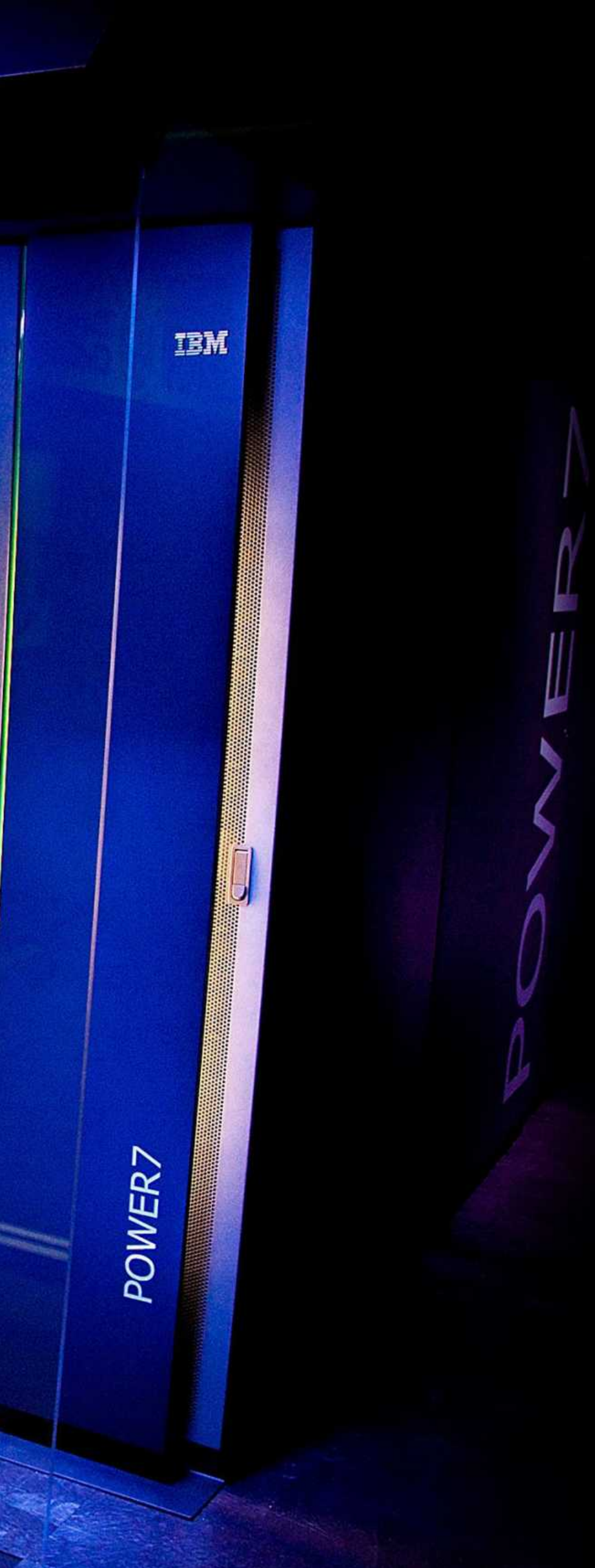


Image: Ben Hider

Analysts say IBM Corp. is hoping to leverage The Weather Co.'s vast trove of climate data as well as its Internet platform, which delivers weather forecasts via free consumer apps along with more extensive services sold to airlines, insurance companies and other businesses.

IBM said Kenny will oversee the Watson business and related partnerships with outside developers who can build software that uses Watson's technology. Michael Rhodin, who previously led the Watson unit, will move to a job developing new business uses for Watson.

The Weather Co. and its current services will become part of IBM's Data and Analytics unit.

Rometty has vowed to increase IBM's revenue from new types of commercial technology, including cloud computing and data analytics, because its mainstay hardware and services businesses are no longer growing. The company reported earlier this month that its overall revenue for the last three months of 2015 was down for the 15th consecutive quarter.

IBM's board has backed Rometty's efforts. The company disclosed late Thursday that she will receive a $4.5 million performance bonus in addition to her $1.6 million salary for 2015. She received a $3.6 million bonus in 2014.

iTunes

Review



Trailer

Movies & TV Shows



Everest (2015)

Based on the real events of the 1996 Mount Everest disaster; A violent storm terrorizes and endangers the lives of a group of climbers during their final ascent towards the summit.

FIVE FACTS:

1. Filming had to be postponed due to an avalanche during April 2014. This killed 16 people, more than the disaster that this movie is based on.

2. The year of the movie's release, 2015, was also the first year since 1974 where nobody successfully reached the summit of the mountain.

3. Everest opened the 72nd Venice International Film Festival.

4. Keira Knightley shot all her scenes in six days.

5. The film cast includes five Oscar nominees: Jake Gyllenhaal, John Hawkes, Keira Knightley, Emily Watson and Josh Brolin.

iTunes **Preview**

by Baltasar Kormákur
Genre: Drama
Released: 2015
Price: $14.99

★★★★★
10 Ratings

Rotten **Tomatoes**
CERTIFIED FRESH 72%

See more in iTunes



Cast Interview



Crimson Peak

After marrying a mysterious stranger to flee a family tragedy, a young author finds that her new home isn't all it seems...

FIVE FACTS:

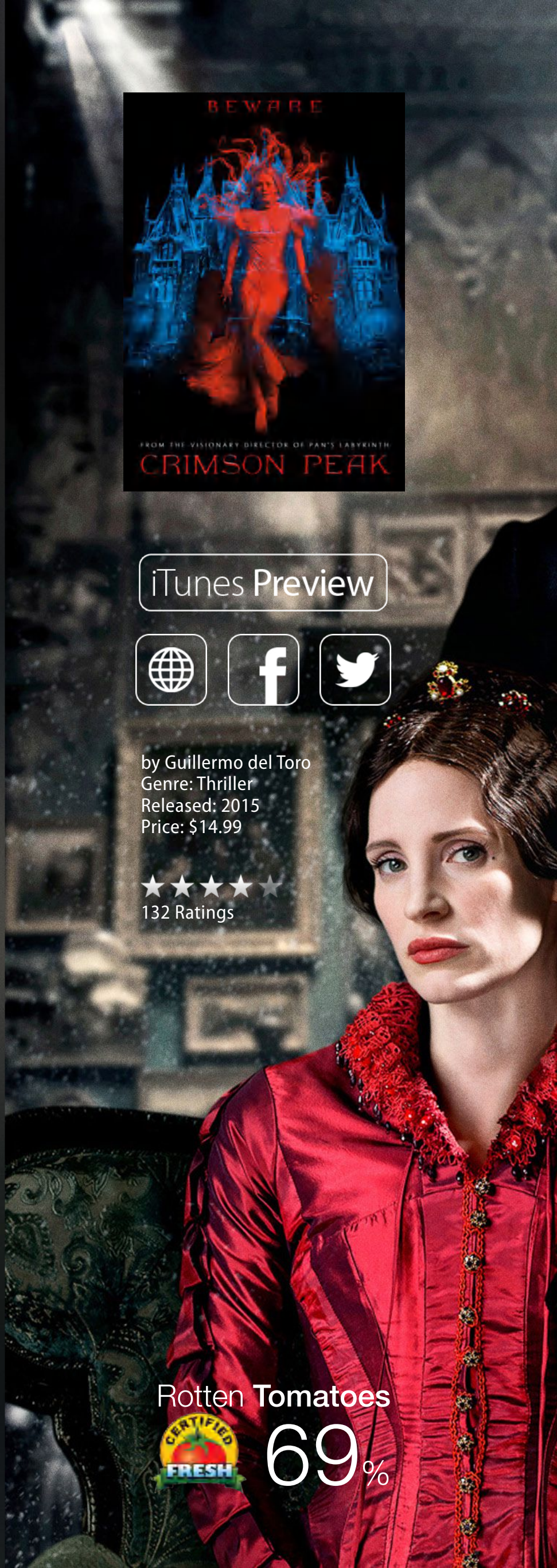
1. Crimson Peak is directed by Guillermo del Toro, who has also worked on other movies including the Hellboy series, Pan's Labyrinth, and The Hobbit series.

2. The house that the majority of the movie is set in was made from scratch-nothing was reused from salvaged parts. It unfortunately had to be torn down at the end of the shoot in order to make space in the studio.

3. The first Guillermo del Toro film since Blade II (2002) to not have cinematography by Guillermo Navarro, who has also worked on the Night at the Museum series, The Twilight Saga, and From Dusk Till Dawn

4. del Toro's inspirations for the movie include The Exorcist, The Omen, and The Shining.

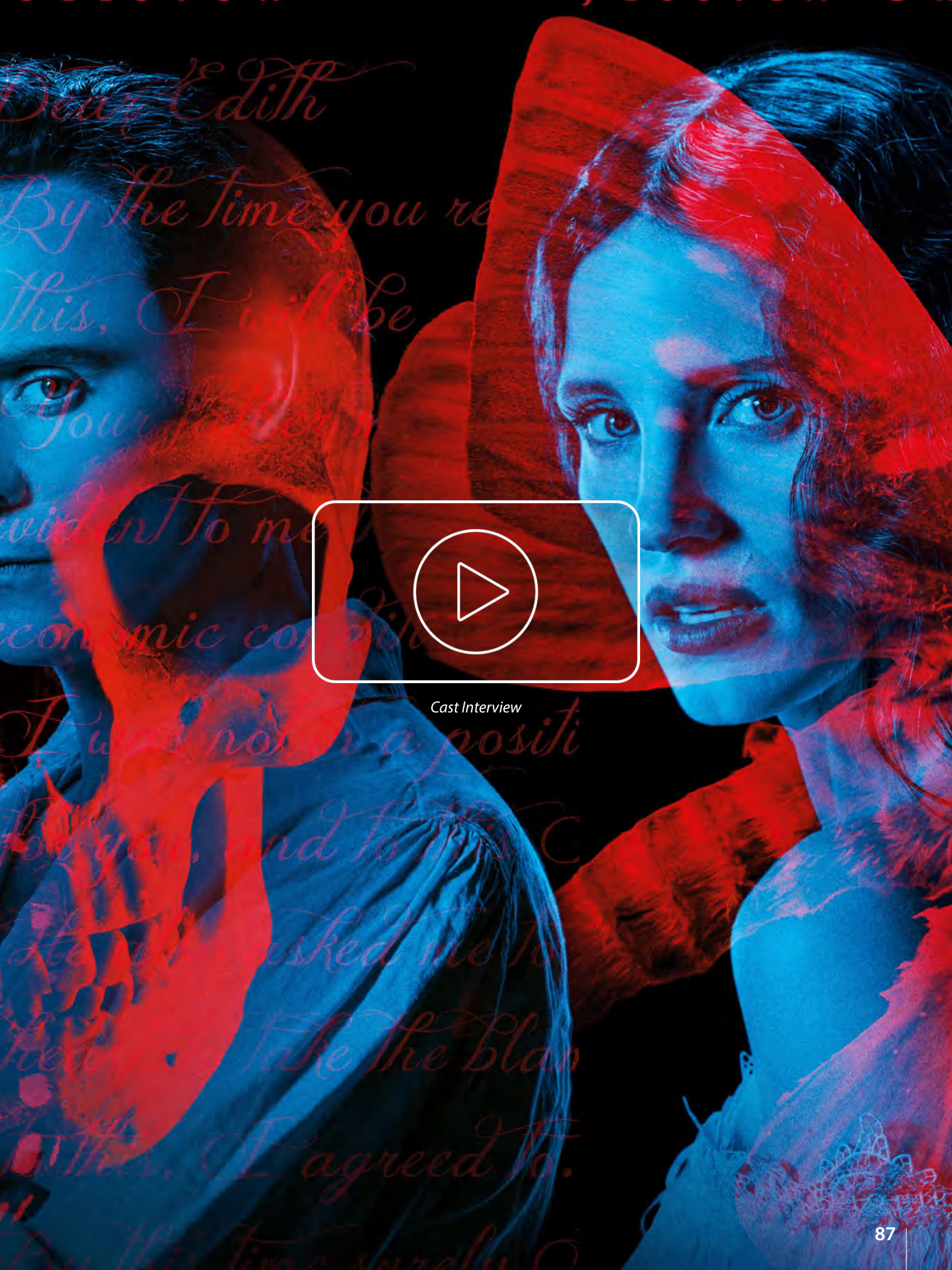
5. Crimson Peak has the shortest shooting schedule out of all of del Toro's films so far.





Trailer





Cast Interview

iTunes

Review



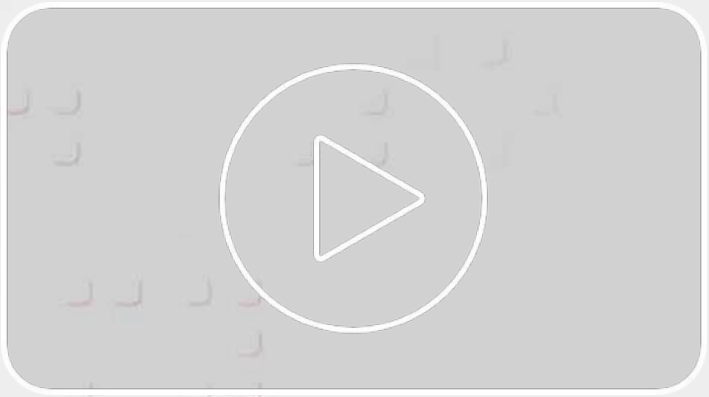
Music



iTunes Preview

Genre: Pop
Released: Jan 29, 2016
16 Songs
Price: $13.99

★★★★★
3119 Ratings



Latest single 'American oxygen'

ANTI (Deluxe)

Rihanna

Over a decade into her career, the eighth studio album from Rihanna is evidence enough that the singer-songwriter hasn't run out of steam yet.

FIVE FACTS:

1. Rihanna has been nominated for a staggering 389 awards, and has won 128 of them.

2. A co-owner of music streaming service Tidal, alongside other artists including Madonna, Chris Martin of Coldplay, and Kanye West.

3. The first woman to pass two billion cumulative views on the music video website VEVO.

4. Having sold over 7 million albums in the UK, Rihanna is the 3rd best selling female of the century.

5. Rihanna has also founded the Believe Foundation, which helps terminally ill children.

See more in iTunes



Tidal video premiere launch

Hymns (Deluxe Edition)

Bloc Party



iTunes Preview

Genre: Alternative
Released: Jan 29, 2016
15 Songs
Price: $11.99

★★★★★
64 Ratings

The fifth studio album from British indie legends Bloc Party sees the quartet settling in well to recording again after a lineup change and a hiatus. It may not be as dynamic as their previous work, but it's still a must for any fan.

FIVE FACTS:

1. The band's debut Silent Alarm was shortlisted for the 2005 Mercury Music Prize, won the Album of the Year 2004 by NME, and earned several nominations, amongst other accolades.

2. You may know the band for their track 'Helicopter', which has appeared in several video games (most notably Guitar Hero III), movies, and TV shows.

3. The Guardian newspaper named the band's second effort A Weekend in the City as one of their '1000 Albums to Hear Before You Die'.

4. The band allegedly got their break after lead singer Kele Okereke went to a Franz Ferdinand concert and gave a copy of their first single to the lead singer of the band, as well as to a BBC Radio 1 DJ.

5. Ever member of the band pursued side projects or solo careers during the band's hiatus- most notably Okereke, whose debut solo effort The Boxer reached number 2 on the UK Dance Chart.



Leading single ‘the good news’



'The love within'



BOX OFFICE TOP 20: 'KUNG FU PANDA 3' DETHRONES 'REVENANT'



"Kung Fu Panda 3" punched "The Revenant" back to its second place spot over the weekend. The animated sequel brought in a robust $41.3 million - which is a franchise low, but nonetheless a healthy showing in a generally slow time of the year at the box office. "Kung Fu Panda 3" will also have animated family film territory to itself until "Zootopia" opens in March.

In second place, "The Revenant" added $12.8 million to its total, and in third place, "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" earned $11.1 million.

Other new openers were not so lucky. Disney's live-action Coast Guard adventure pic "The Finest Hours" opened in fourth place with $10.3 million, while the parody film "Fifty Shades of Black" debuted in tenth place with a mere $5.9 million. The saddest of the bunch, though, was the beleaguered Natalie Portman-led Western "Jane Got a Gun" which opened to a measly $835,572 from 1,210 locations.



The top 20 movies at U.S. and Canadian theaters Friday through Sunday, followed by distribution studio, gross, number of theater locations, average receipts per location, total gross and number of weeks in release, as compiled Monday by Rentrak:

1. *"Kung Fu Panda 3," 20th Century Fox, $41,282,042, 3,955 locations, $10,438 average, $41,282,042, 1 week.*

2. *"The Revenant," 20th Century Fox, $12,779,530, 3,330 locations, $3,838 average, $138,550,898, 6 weeks.*

3. *"Star Wars: The Force Awakens," Disney, $11,116,684, 2,556 locations, $4,349 average, $895,760,846, 7 weeks.*

4. *"The Finest Hours," Disney, $10,288,932, 3,143 locations, $3,274 average, $10,288,932, 1 week.*

5. *"Ride Along 2," Universal, $8,426,610, 2,412 locations, $3,494 average, $70,856,300, 3 weeks.*




1
3

6. *"Dirty Grandpa," Lionsgate, $7,591,049, 2,912 locations, $2,607 average, $22,837,059, 2 weeks.*

7. *"The Boy," STX Entertainment, $7,551,388, 2,671 locations, $2,827 average, $21,185,304, 2 weeks.*

8. *"The 5th Wave," Sony, $7,142,826, 2,908 locations, $2,456 average, $20,330,975, 2 weeks.*

9. *"13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers Of Benghazi," Paramount, $6,274,244, 2,803 locations, $2,238 average, $42,848,089, 3 weeks.10.*

10. *"Fifty Shades Of Black," Open Road, $5,900,528, 2,075 locations, $2,844 average, $5,900,528, 1 week.*



6

10

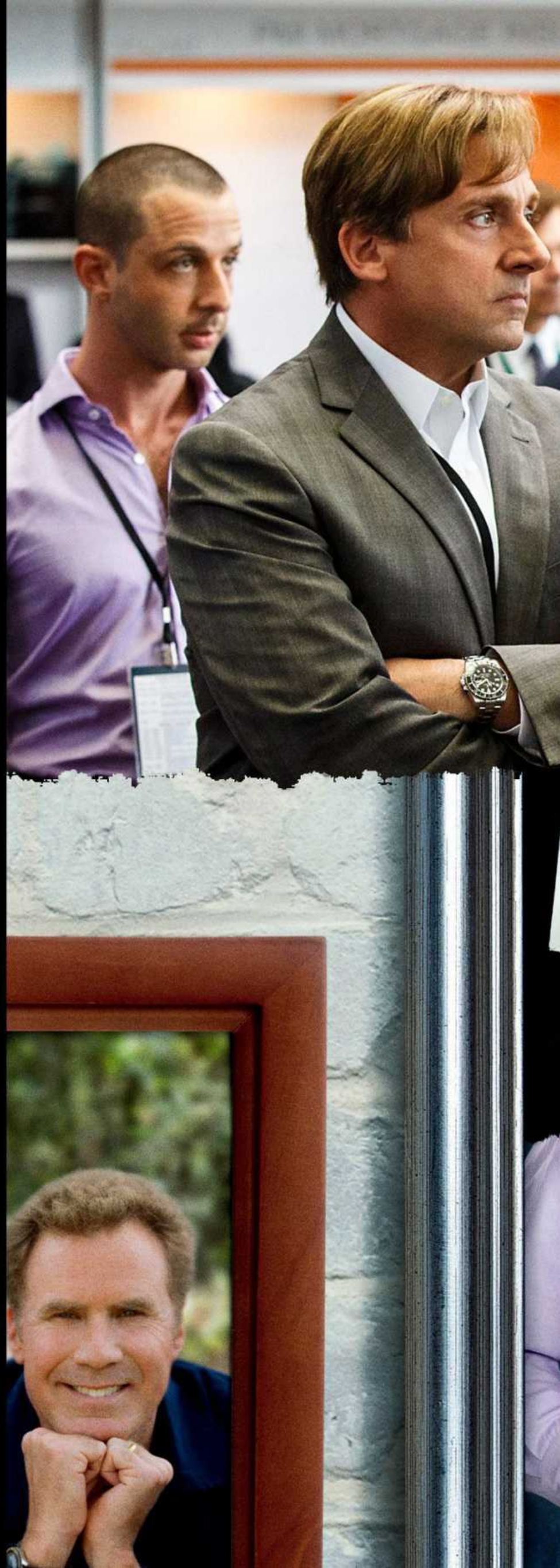
11. *"The Big Short," Paramount, $3,063,220, 983 locations, $3,116 average, $60,963,697, 8 weeks.*

12. *"Daddy's Home," Paramount, $3,056,042, 1,718 locations, $1,779 average, $143,036,385, 6 weeks.*

13. *"MET Opera: Turandot (2016)," Fathom Events, $2,500,000, 900 locations, $2,778 average, $2,500,000, 1 week.*

14. *"Brooklyn," Fox Searchlight, $1,761,149, 748 locations, $2,354 average, $30,432,320, 13 weeks.*

15. *"Room," A24 Films, $1,236,878, 795 locations, $1,556 average, $9,901,663, 16 weeks.*



11

12

16. *"Spotlight," Open Road, $1,200,039, 715 locations, $1,678 average, $34,765,827, 13 weeks.*

17. *"Norm Of The North," Lionsgate, $972,321, 1,506 locations, $646 average, $15,964,838, 3 weeks.*

18. *"Jane Got A Gun," The Weinstein Company, $835,572, 1,210 locations, $691 average, $835,572, 1 week.*

19. *"The Hateful Eight," The Weinstein Company, $719,694, 505 locations, $1,425 average, $52,368,676, 6 weeks.*

20. *"Sisters," Universal, $646,485, 529 locations, $1,222 average, $86,119,480, 7 weeks.*



18

19

CAPT. PHILLIPS TO SPEAK AT VERMONT UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT

Capt. Richard Phillips will deliver the commencement speech at a Vermont university.

The Rutland Herald **reports** that the former captain of the Maersk Alabama will speak at Castleton University in May. His daughter was enrolled as an art major there when he was kidnapped by Somali pirates.

He was portrayed by Tom Hanks in the 2013 film "Captain Phillips," which details the hijacking off the coast of Somalia. Phillips spent five days as a prisoner at sea before he was rescued by U.S. Navy SEALS in 2009.

In the opening scene of "Captain Phillips," a Castleton sticker can be seen on Phillips' van.

President David Wolk says the university is honored to have Phillips share some of his life experiences in his commencement address.

Image: Mark Lennihan

XEROX REPORTS SALES DECLINE AND PLANS TO SPLIT COMPANY

Xerox reported its 15th consecutive quarter of declining sales on Friday and announced plans to split the company into two businesses.

The move will reverse a six-year-old effort by the printer and copier maker to boost sales by providing outsourced business services to corporate customers. Xerox said Friday that it will spin off the services operation it acquired when it bought Affiliated Computer Services Inc. for nearly $6 billion in 2010.

Xerox reported better-than-expected earnings for the quarter that ended Dec. 31, but revenue fell 8 percent from a year earlier.

The Norwalk, Connecticut-based company said net income rose 43 percent to $285 million, on sales of $4.6 billion. Earnings amounted to 27 cents per share, or 32 cents a share after adjusting for amortization costs. Analysts surveyed by Zacks Investment Research were expecting earnings of 29 cents a share.

Xerox has been under pressure from activist investor Carl Icahn, who has argued that its business outsourcing service would be more valuable as a stand-alone company. Xerox said Friday that it will split into two independent companies by the end of the year.

One will consist of Xerox's core printer and copier business, known as "document technology," which had 40,000 workers and about $11 billion in sales last year. The other will focus on "business process outsourcing," or providing back-office functions like payment processing and other services. The latter has about 104,000 employees and produced about $7 billion in revenue last year.

Names and leadership of the new companies are still to be determined.

Xerox and Icahn reached a deal on the governance of the business outsourcing company. Under the breakup, Icahn will get to name three of the nine directors on that company's board. A search is also going to be started for an external candidate to serve as CEO of the business. Icahn will be allowed to choose an individual to observe and advise the committee that is performing the search.

Icahn said in a written statement that he believes the independent business process outsourcing company will enhance shareholder value.

Image: Mark Lennihan



Xerox also announced plans to cut spending by at least $600 million, on top of earlier cost-cutting efforts.

Xerox bought ACS at a time when leading technology companies, including Hewlett-Packard and Oracle, were attempting to expand through large acquisitions and become "one-stop" providers of tech hardware and services to big corporate customers.

But the rise of rise of "cloud computing" allowed smaller competitors to offer online services with more flexibility and lower costs than traditional outsourcing. Printing and copying has also suffered from the growing reliance on email, smartphones and tablets, which make it easy to view documents electronically.

Hewlett-Packard split into two companies last year.

Xerox profits have fallen in all but three of the last 15 quarters.

Moody's Investor's Service said it would put its ratings for Xerox on review for a possible downgrade, saying that the planned separation will result in two smaller, less diverse and less profitable companies than the existing Xerox. Meanwhile, Standard & Poor's Ratings Services downgraded its ratings for Xerox to "BBB-" from "BBB," one notch above non-investment grade, or junk status.

For the current quarter ending in April, Xerox expects its per-share earnings to range from 21 cents to 24 cents. It forecast full-year earnings in the range of $1.10 to $1.20 per share.

Xerox shares rose 52 cents, or 5.6 percent, to $9.75. Its shares have fallen 28 percent over the past year.

Image: Jeremy Bales

SUPER BOWL AN OPPORTUNITY FOR 'CBS THIS MORNING'

The Super Bowl looms as an important opportunity for the people at "CBS This Morning," although they have no plans to be anywhere near the San Francisco area.

CBS' telecast of the big game is expected to give extra attention to the news show, which is steadily becoming a player in the morning TV world. CBS hopes new viewers tune in, and the show's Gayle King has the spotlight of an interview with President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama during the pregame show.

"CBS This Morning" is expecting one of its biggest audiences on Feb. 8, the morning after the game, simply through people whose set will still be tuned to CBS because of the night before. Maybe they'll stick around and watch.

Rather than send King or co-anchors Charlie Rose and Norah O'Donnell to the football field, show executive producer Chris Licht is keeping them in New York and trying to build the best possible show around them that day.

"If you do something connected to the Super Bowl, you may get a short-term gain but nobody will make the connection that this is something that they should do as part of their everyday routine," he said.

CBS' morning news show had been an afterthought for decades and, even after the current trio began in 2012, it hasn't left third place behind ABC's "Good Morning America" and NBC's "Today." So far this season, "Good Morning America" averages 5.06 million viewers, "Today" has 4.61 million and "CBS This Morning" has 3.41 million, the Nielsen company said.

But "CTM" has gained nearly a million viewers in four years, a startling figure at a time viewer declines are the norm. ABC's trend line is down; "Good Morning America" has lost some 400,000 viewers in the past year. "Today" has done better lately, but is still about 300,000 viewers down from four years ago, Nielsen said.

Drawing on the networks' strengths from the "CBS Evening News" and "60 Minutes" broadcasts, the morning show has adopted a meat-and-potatoes approach that has clicked at a time its rivals have gone lighter. Its calling cards are the "eye-opener" segment that gives a quick video review of the day's top talking points, and interviews that feature all three of the hosts.

"We're putting on the news," CBS News President David Rhodes said. "It's not that complicated."

One measure of success for King is the long-time crew member at CBS who never used to tell people who asked him what show he worked on. Now, she said, he tells them that it's "CBS This Morning."

The high-profile Super Bowl Sunday assignment is a vote of confidence for both King and the show. Yet it does have its pitfalls. King wants to get a sense of what life is like at the White House

on game day and hopes to draw out some of the first lady's sense of humor, and not take a simply straightforward news approach that would not be in keeping with the spirit of the day. But she doesn't want to ignore the news, and doesn't want to look silly.

"The one thing I don't want to hear anybody say is, 'Oh my God, that is so boring,'" she said.

Licht, who was lured to CBS from "Morning Joe" on MSNBC, flatly answers "no" when asked if he's surprised at the viewership gain.

"I have to be honest," he said. "I always felt that if the audience sampled us, they would like us ... We all believed in our gut that there was a viewer that wasn't being served in the morning, and we gave them that option of hard news."

Rhodes knows better than to make any victory predictions in a time slot that, as King notes, hasn't been a regular winner for CBS since the days of "Captain Kangaroo." At least his rivals aren't so far ahead that he can't see their tail lights anymore.

"We have a lot more people watching now than when we've started," he said. "So anything's possible."

MICROSOFT EARNINGS SHOW EFFECTS OF TURNAROUND STRATEGY

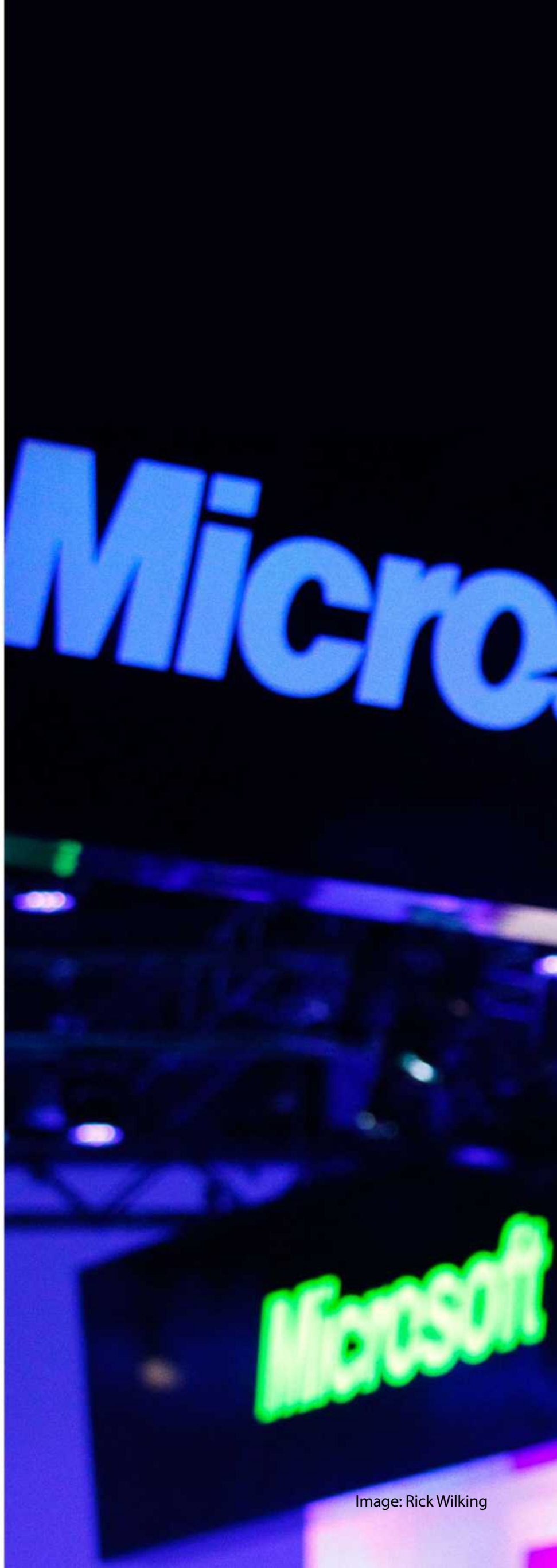


Image: Rick Wilking

Like a friendly but persistent sales rep, Microsoft has a message for anyone who owns a personal computer: If you haven't yet upgraded to Windows 10, the company highly recommends it.

So highly, in fact, that in coming weeks, PC owners who have set their machines to automatically install important updates - like security fixes - could find the new operating system already downloaded and ready for activation.

Microsoft's aggressive campaign to promote Windows 10 has led to its deployment on more than 200 million devices since its July release. It's part of a multi-pronged strategy, along with a push to expand in "cloud" computing, that analysts say is driving the early stages of a financial turnaround, as evidenced by Microsoft's latest earnings report on Thursday.


Microsoft

The Redmond, Washington-based tech company reported $5 billion in profit on nearly $24 billion in sales for the quarter ending Dec. 31. Revenue and profit were both down from a year ago, but after adjusting for deferred revenue and one-time costs, the numbers were better than Wall Street analysts expected.

Microsoft beat Wall Street's estimates for sales in key segments. Those include its cloud-computing segment, which lets commercial customers run their businesses on Microsoft's servers, and the division that sells PC software, Surface tablets and Xbox gaming consoles. Adjusted earnings amounted to 78 cents a share, while analysts polled by FactSet had expected adjusted earnings of 71 cents a share.

"All around, this looks like a quarter that (Microsoft CEO Satya) Nadella can frame and put in his office," FBR Capital Markets analyst Daniel Ives said. Microsoft's stock rose more than 3 percent in extended trading after the results came out.

Long a dominant seller of PC-based software, Microsoft has seen its profit decline as consumers and businesses buy fewer PCs, cutting into licensing fees Microsoft gets from computer-makers. The last major upgrade of its operating system, known as Windows 8, was widely viewed as a flop, which hurt PC sales even more.

Nadella, who was named to the top job in 2014, has been pushing Microsoft to adapt to a world where people are increasingly using mobile gadgets, and where businesses are moving more of their operations to remote data centers, accessed via the Internet.



Image: Brian Smale







Microsoft broke with tradition last July by releasing Windows 10 as a free upgrade for older PCs, with no charge for future updates. It's also redesigned other popular products, such as the Office word-processing and spreadsheet programs, to work as mobile apps for devices running operating systems made by its rivals, Apple and Google.

The goal is to get people using Microsoft's latest products, no matter what kind of device they prefer, said Frank Gillett, a tech analyst with Forrester Research. He said that should give Microsoft more opportunities to make money by selling premium features or apps, such as online storage, Skype minutes or music and games.

The company is already seeing an increase in sales of apps and online advertising, tied to new features in Windows 10, Nadella told analysts Thursday.

But it's a gradual process, Gillett cautioned. Microsoft's personal-computing division reported $12.7 billion in sales for the December quarter, down 5 percent from a year earlier. Within that division, Microsoft said revenue from licensing Windows to PC makers was also down 5 percent, although the company noted that was better than the 8.3 percent decline in overall PC sales that market researchers have estimated for the October-December quarter.

Meanwhile, analysts say Microsoft is also rapidly transforming its commercial-computing division by encouraging corporate customers to use its data centers. Microsoft's commercial "cloud computing" service is now the industry's second-largest, after Amazon's.

The potential for that business "is massive - larger than any market we have ever participated in," Nadella said Thursday.

Revenue for Microsoft's cloud division rose 5 percent, to $6.3 billion, for the December quarter. The company has had more success in that business than other established commercial tech giants like Hewlett-Packard and Oracle, according to Ives, who called cloud computing a "bedrock" element of Nadella's strategy.

As for the company's aggressive promotion of Windows 10, those promotional nudges have drawn a few complaints from PC owners who don't necessarily want to upgrade their software. But in coming months, Microsoft says the Windows 10 upgrade will be re-categorized from "optional" to "recommended," which means people who use the automatic update feature on older Windows PCs could find the new software has downloaded automatically.

Microsoft says users will still get a prompt asking if they want to accept or decline the upgrade. They can also revert back to their old software if they change their mind within 31 days.



Image: Brian Smale

MUSIC FESTIVAL PROMOTER SFX FILES FOR BANKRUPTCY PROTECTION

The company behind the Electric Zoo and Tomorrowland music festivals has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

New York-based SFX Entertainment Inc. says, however, that its festivals and events will continue as planned. Filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection allows companies to reorganize their debt while they keep their businesses operating.

As part of its agreement with bondholders, SFX will eliminate more than $300 million in debt from its balance sheets and be turned into a private company.

Shares in SFX had fallen steadily since they debuted on the Nasdaq market at $13 apiece in 2013.

The company promotes electronic dance music events around the world, including Mysteryland and Life in Color. It also operates Beatport, an online music store for electronic dance songs.

In the past year, SFX's chairman and CEO Robert Sillerman tried unsuccessfully to buy the company and take it private. Sillerman said Monday that he will remain as chairman of SFX, but said the search is on for a new CEO.

YAHOO TO CUT 1,700 WORKERS AS CEO TRIES TO SAVE HER OWN JOB

Yahoo is laying off about 1,700 employees and shedding some of its excess baggage in a shake-up likely to determine whether CEO Marissa Mayer can save her own job.

The long-anticipated purge, announced Tuesday, will jettison about 15 percent of Yahoo's workforce along with an assortment of services that Mayer decided aren't worth the time and money that the Internet company has been putting into them.

Mayer hopes to sell some of Yahoo's unwanted services for about $1 billion, though she didn't identify which ones. In an apparent concession to some shareholders, Mayer also said Yahoo's board will mull "strategic alternatives" that could result in the sale of all the company's Internet operations. Analysts have speculated that Verizon, AT&T and Comcast might be interested in buying Yahoo's main business, despite years of deterioration.

Image: David Paul Morris



Mayer expressed confidence that her plan to run Yahoo as a smaller, more focused company "will dramatically brighten our future and improve our competitiveness, and attractiveness to users, advertisers, and partners."

This cost-cutting overhaul might be Mayer's last chance to persuade restless shareholders that she has figured out how to revive the Internet company's growth after three-and-half years of futility.



Image: Max Morse



Some of Yahoo's most outspoken shareholders, such as SpringOwl Asset Management, already have concluded that Mayer should be laid off, too. Mayer, a former rising star at Google who helped Google eclipse Yahoo, has given no indication she intends to leave.

Even after the mass firings are completed by the end of March, Yahoo will still have about 9,000 workers - three times the roughly 3,000 people that SpringOwl believes the company should be employing, based on its steadily declining revenue.

“We would like to see a higher stock price, and we think Marissa and her current management team have become a hindrance to that,” said Eric Jackson, SpringOwl’s managing director. He declined to disclose the size of SpringOwl’s Yahoo investment.

Yahoo’s stock dipped 25 cents to $28.81 in extended trading after details of Mayer’s latest turnaround attempt came out.

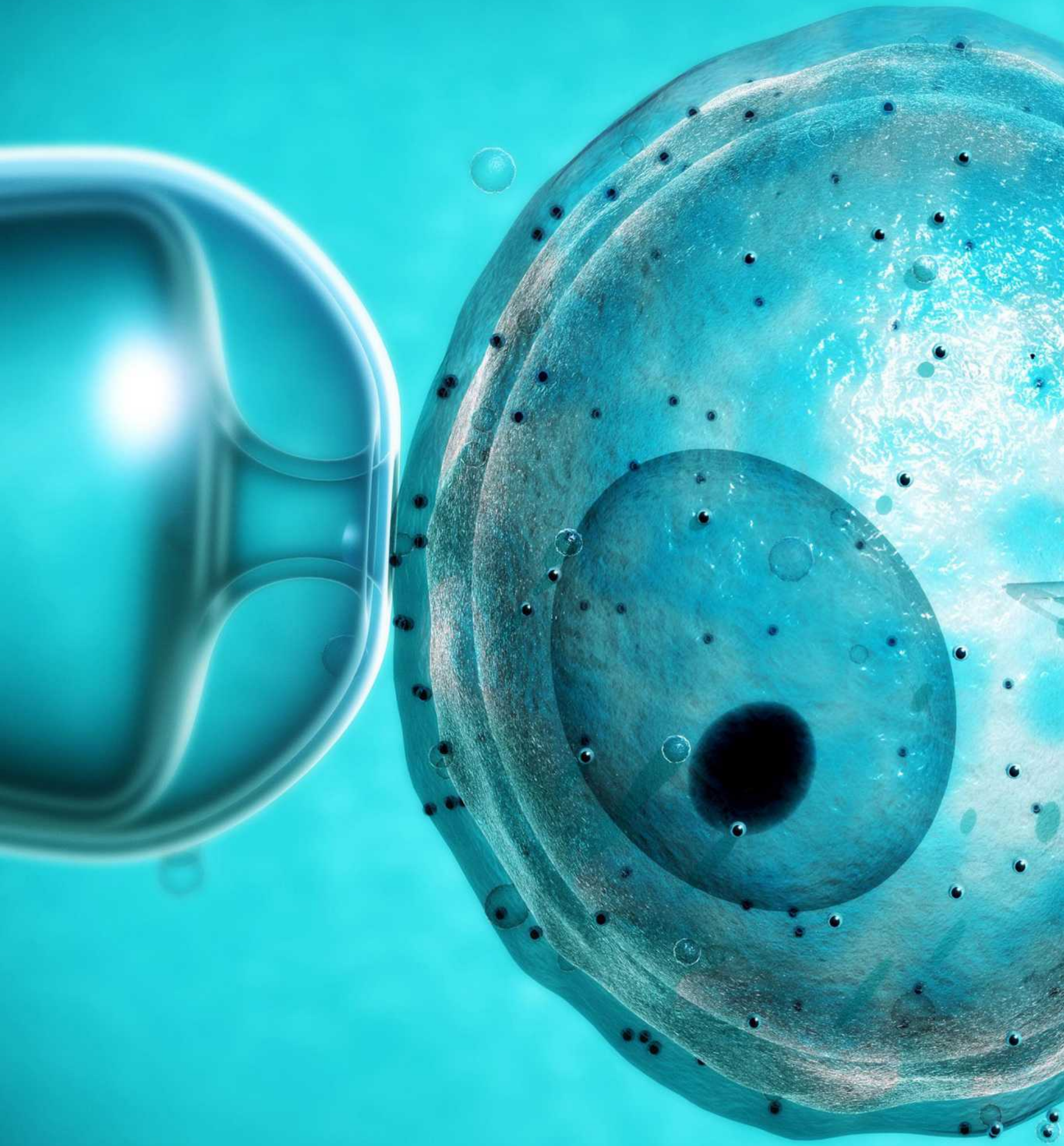
Yahoo’s revenue has been shrinking through most of Mayer’s reign, even though she has spent more than $3 billion buying more than 40 companies, while bringing in new talent and developing mobile applications and other services designed to attract more traffic and advertisers.

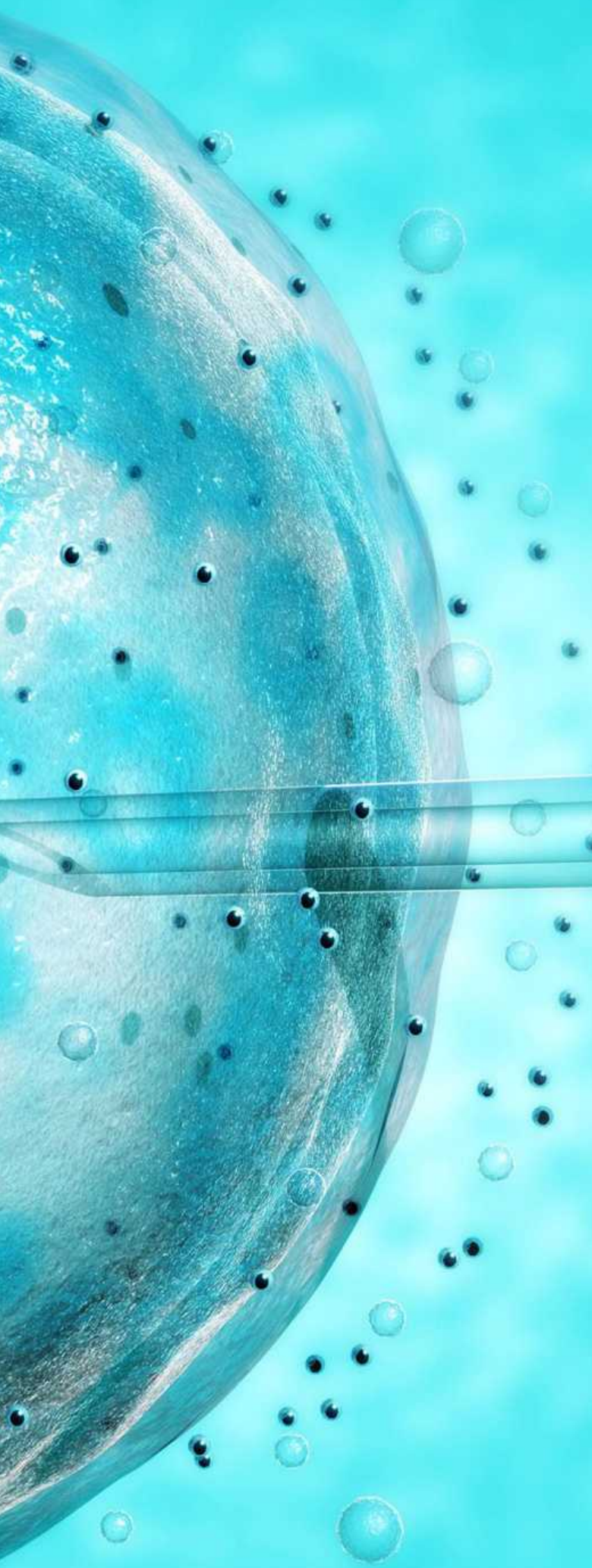
The decline has persisted while advertisers have been steadily increasing their digital marketing efforts. Most of that money has been flowing to Google and Facebook - two companies once far smaller than the now 20-year-old Yahoo Inc.

Image: David Paul Morris

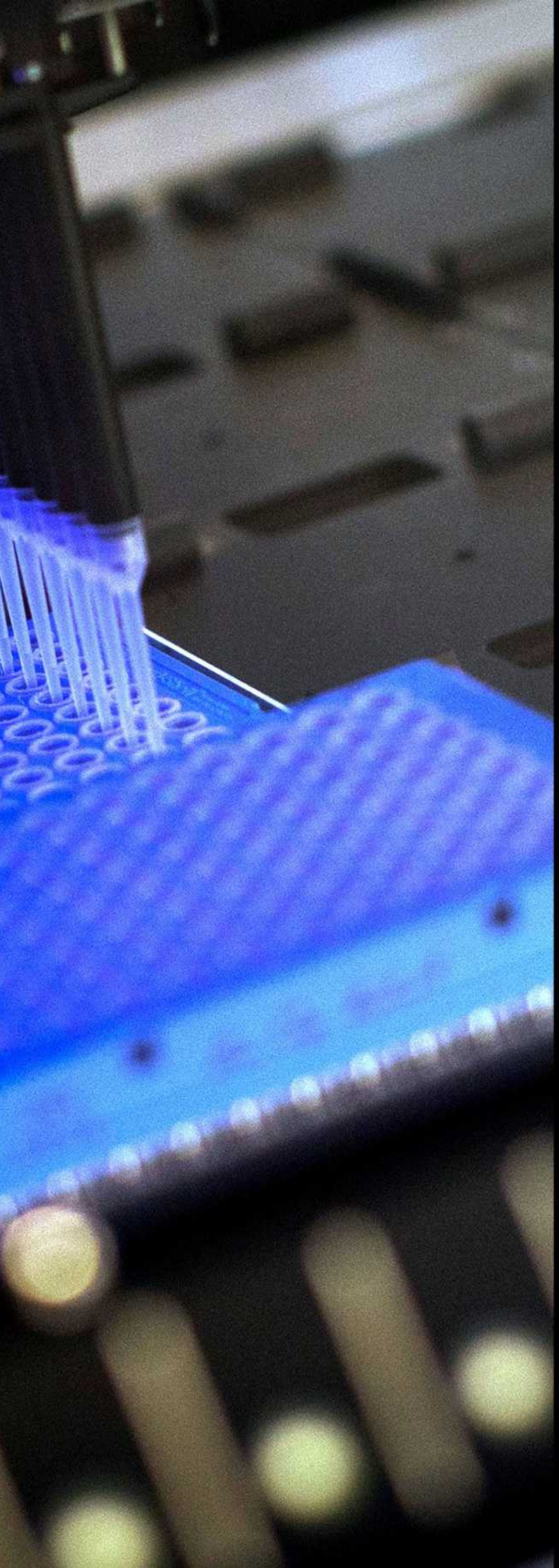


SCIENCE





FACTS ABOUT GENE EDITING AS BRITAIN OKS STUDY



Britain's decision to allow researchers to edit the genes of human embryos - not to create babies but to start unraveling the earliest stages of development - is raising new questions about the ethics of this hot new technology.

Genome editing is a technique that lets scientists alter the DNA of plants, animals or humans more precisely than ever before, much like a biological cut-and-paste program. Scientists say one day the technique might help treat devastating inherited diseases, such as muscular dystrophy, or wipe out malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

But one concern is that gene editing also might eventually lead to so-called designer babies. Here's a look at the science and controversy:

WHAT IS GENE EDITING

While scientists have long been able to find defective genes, fixing them has been so cumbersome that it's slowed development of genetic therapies. With gene editing, scientists home in on a piece of DNA and use molecular tools that act as scissors to snip that spot - deleting a defective gene, repairing it or replacing it.

There are some older methods but a new tool called CRISPR-Cas9 has been adopted by laboratories worldwide because it's faster, cheaper, simple enough to use with minimal training and allows altering of multiple genes simultaneously.

WHAT IT MIGHT TREAT

The biggest use so far is to rapidly engineer animals with human-like disorders for

basic research, but promising gene-editing experiments make regular headlines.

Much like a bone marrow transplant, researchers hope to use CRISPR for diseases like sickle cell, correcting the faulty gene in someone's own blood-producing cells rather than implanting donated ones.



Image: Jezperklauzen



Similarly, doctors in Britain recently treated a 1-year-old with leukemia using donated immune cells that had been experimentally altered with an older editing method to target her cancer. A California company is testing a non-CRISPR way to make HIV patients' immune cells better resist the virus.

The University of Massachusetts just reported using a CRISPR technique to switch off, rather than cut and repair, a gene in muscle cells that causes one form of muscular dystrophy.

And Harvard researchers recently edited 62 spots in pig DNA, part of work to use the animals to grow organs for human transplant.

THE BIGGEST HURDLE

Safety is a key question because gene editing isn't always precise enough; there's the possibility of accidentally cutting DNA that's similar to the real target. Out-of-body treatments like altering blood cells get around the fear of fixing one problem only to spark another, and efforts to improve precision are underway.

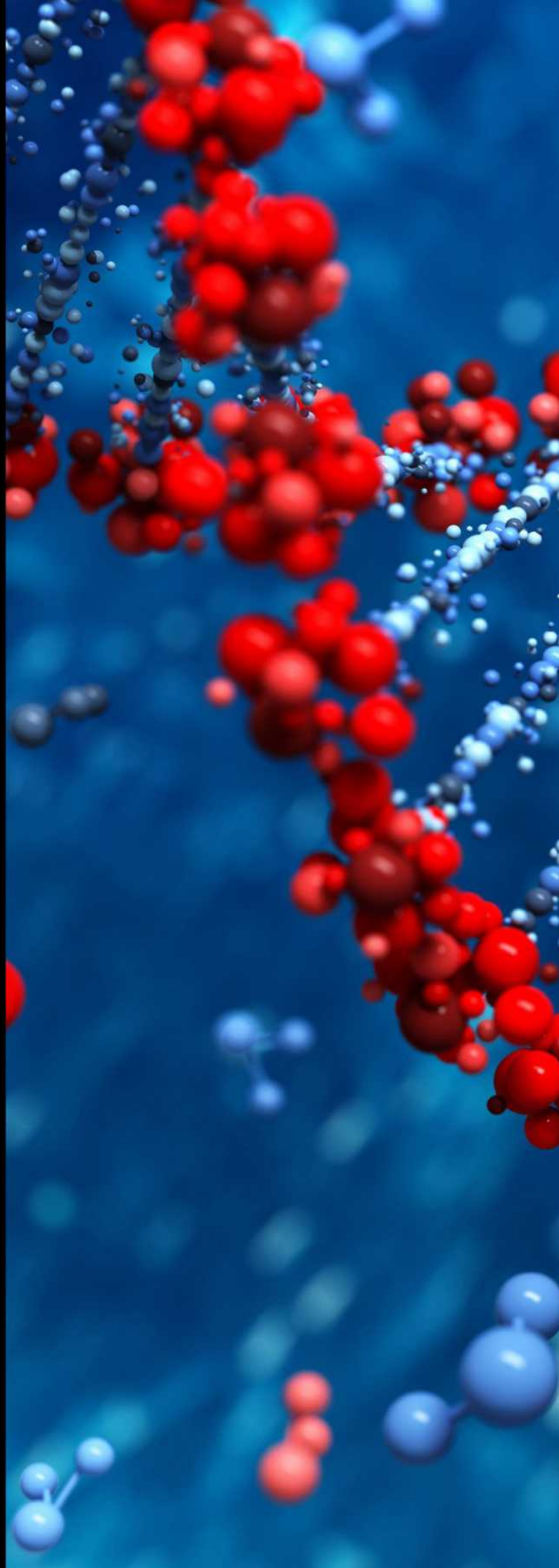
THE ETHICS CONTROVERSY

Altering genes in sperm, eggs or embryos can spread those changes to future generations, so-called germline engineering that might one day stop parents from passing inherited diseases to their children.

Chinese scientists reported the first-known attempt to edit human embryos last spring, working with leftovers from fertility clinics that never could have developed into fetuses. They aimed to correct a deadly inherited gene, but uncovered problems that will require more research.

Among the ethical concerns are that future generations couldn't consent, and any long-term negative effects might not become apparent for years. There's also concern about babies designed for better intellect, athleticism or appearance rather than to prevent disease.

In December, international scientists and ethicists gathered at the U.S. National Academy of Sciences declared that while gene-editing is nowhere near ready to use for pregnancy, altering early embryos as part of careful laboratory research should be allowed even as society grapples with the ethical questions.



And on Monday, Britain's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority announced it was granting permission for that kind of laboratory research at the Francis Crick Institute, a study of the genes human embryos need to develop properly in the first seven days.

IS IT LEGAL

Where you live determines if, or what kind of, research can be performed on embryos. Some countries, especially in Europe, ban germline research. Others, such as China, have guidelines described as unenforceable. Britain allows basic lab research only.

In the U.S., the NIH won't fund research involving germline editing but private funding is allowed.



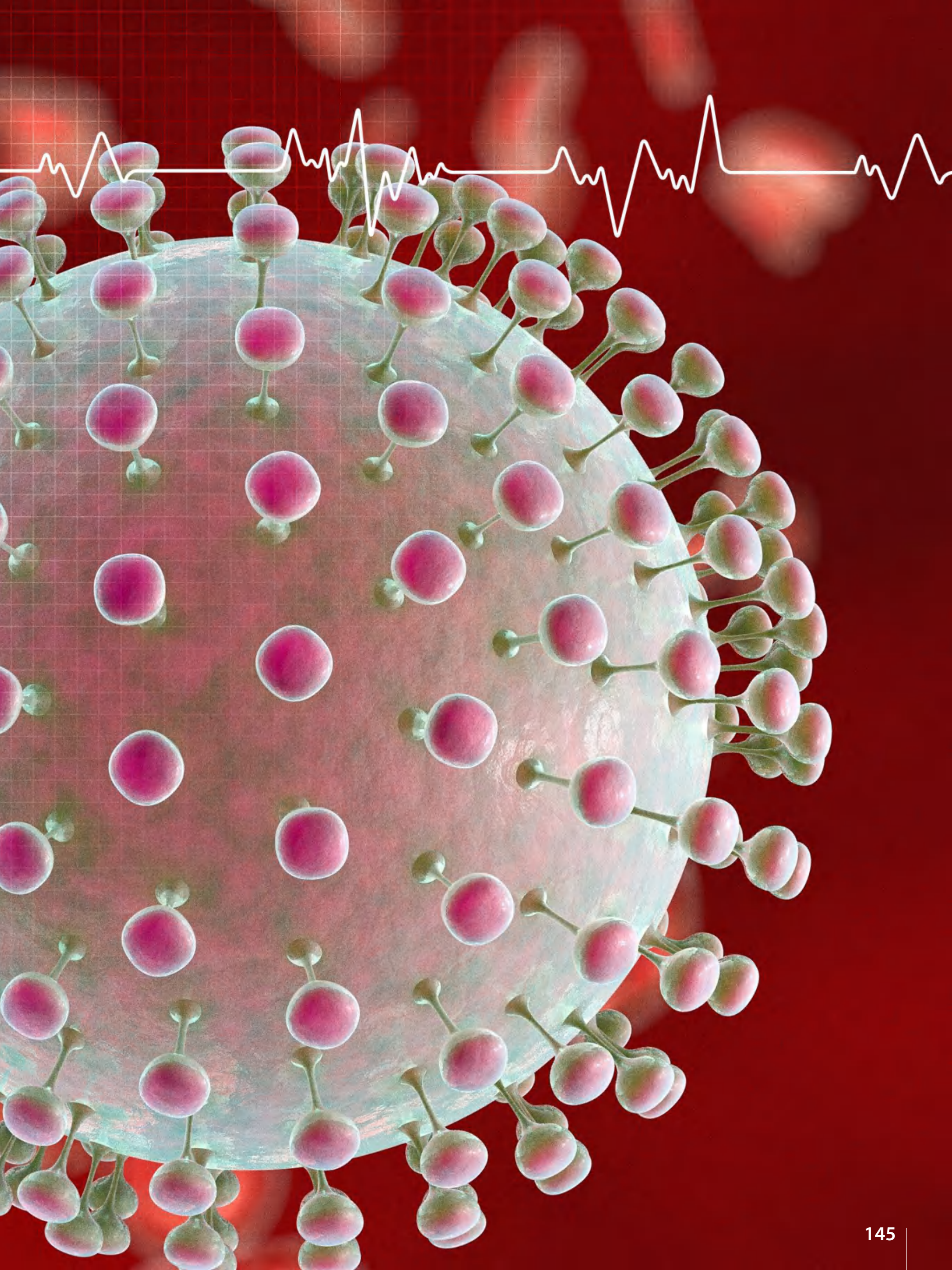


BEYOND MEDICINE

Human gene editing aside, there are environmental concerns, too. Experiments are underway to force genetic changes to spread rapidly through populations of animals and plants - changes that could wipe out invasive species or disease-carrying insects. A California team recently reported a first step, hatching malaria-resistant mosquitoes that could easily spread their new protective gene to their offspring.



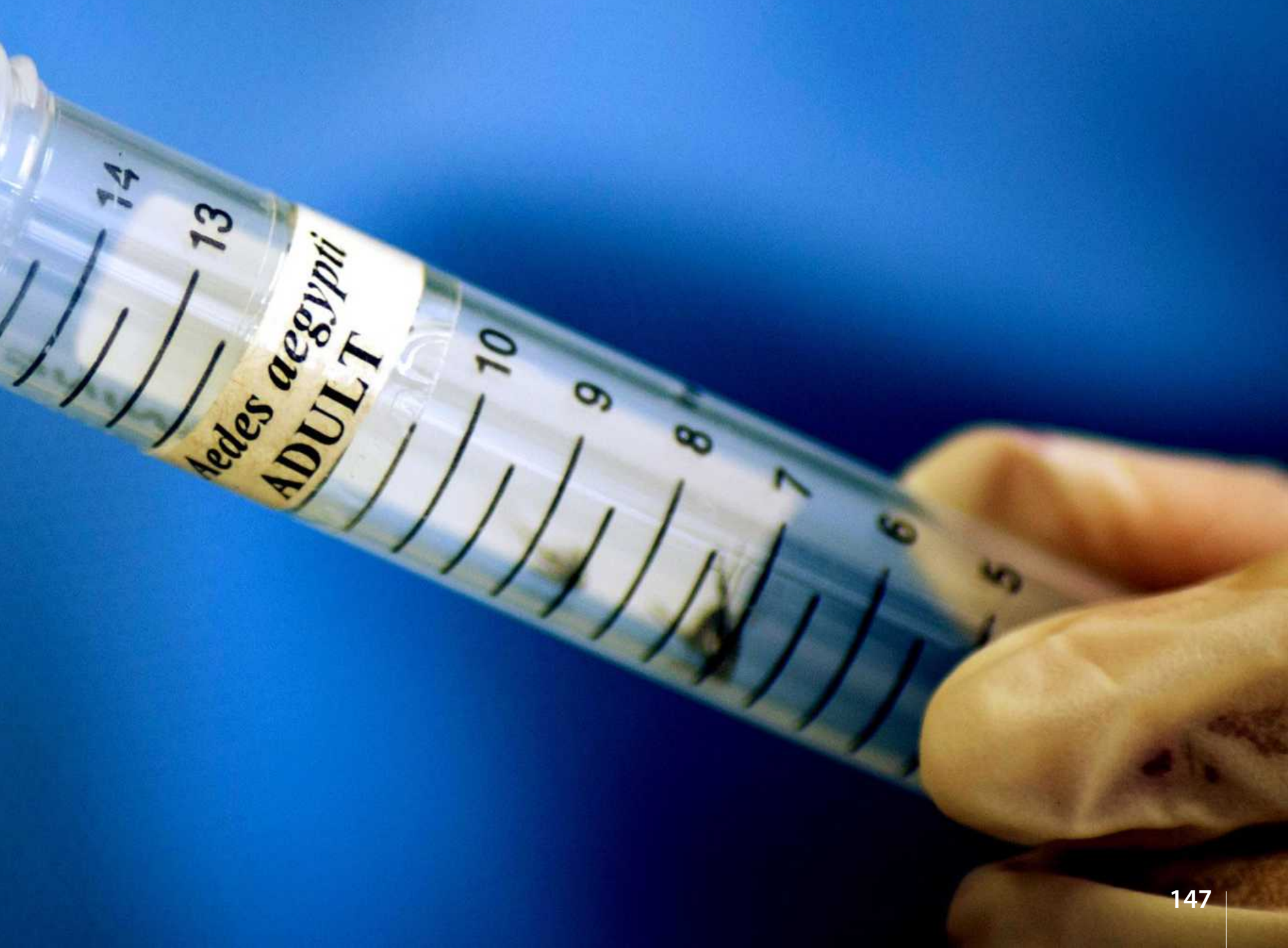
WHO DECLARES GLOBAL EMERGENCY OVER ZIKA VIRUS SPREAD





The World Health Organization declared a global emergency over the explosive spread of the Zika virus, which has been linked to birth defects in the Americas, calling it is an “extraordinary event” that poses a public health threat to other parts of the world.

The U.N. agency took the rare step despite a lack of definitive evidence proving the mosquito-borne virus is causing a surge in babies born with brain defects and abnormally small heads in Brazil and following a 2013-14 outbreak in French Polynesia.



Monday's emergency meeting of independent experts was called in response to the spike in babies born with microcephaly in Brazil since the virus was first found there last year. Officials in French Polynesia also documented a connection between Zika and neurological complications when the virus was spreading there two years ago, at the same time as dengue fever.

"After a review of the evidence, the committee advised that the clusters of microcephaly and other neurological complications constitute an extraordinary event and public health threat to other parts of the world," WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan said.

WHO, which was widely criticized for its sluggish response to the 2014 Ebola crisis in West Africa, has been eager to show its responsiveness this time. Despite dire warnings that Ebola was out of control in mid-2014, WHO didn't declare an emergency until months later, after nearly 1,000 people had died.

"If indeed, the scientific linkage between Zika and microcephaly is established, can you imagine if we do not do all this work now and wait until the scientific evidence comes out?" Chan said. "Then people will say, 'Why didn't you take action?'"

WHO estimates there could be up to 4 million cases of Zika in the Americas in the next year, but no recommendations were made to restrict travel or trade.

"It is important to understand, there are several measures pregnant women can take," Chan said. "If you can delay travel and it does not affect your other family commitments, it is something to consider."



Image: Pierre Albouy/WHO

“If they need to travel, they can get advice from their physician and take personal protective measures, like wearing long sleeves and shirts and pants and using mosquito repellent.”

Last month, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control advised pregnant women to postpone visits to Brazil and other countries in the region with Zika outbreaks. But officials said it was unlikely the virus could cause widespread problems in the U.S.

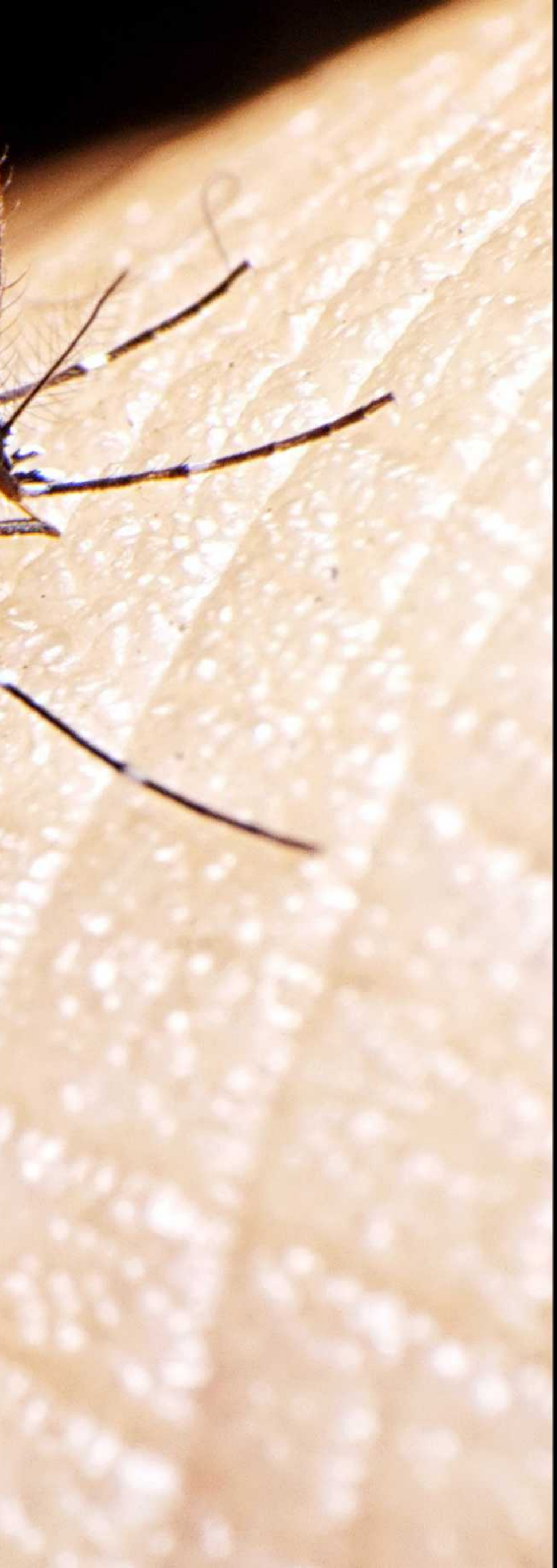
The last such public health emergency was declared for the devastating Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which killed more than 11,000 people. Similar declarations were made for polio in 2013 and the 2009 swine flu pandemic.

Such emergency declarations are meant as an international SOS signal and usually trigger increased money and efforts to halt the outbreak, as well as prompting research into possible treatments and vaccines. There are currently no licensed treatments or vaccines for Zika.

WHO officials say it could be six to nine months before science proves or disproves any connection between the virus and babies born in Brazil or elsewhere with abnormally small heads.

Zika was first identified in 1947 in Uganda but until last year, it wasn’t believed to cause any serious effects; about 80 percent of infected people never experience symptoms. The virus has also been linked to Guillain-Barre syndrome, which causes muscle weakness and nerve problems.





Michael Osterholm, an infectious diseases expert at the University of Minnesota, said it was still unclear how Zika had evolved since it first emerged in Africa, but that even minor genetic changes might have major consequences.

"It could have just been some point mutation (in the virus) that has now made a big difference," Osterholm said, adding it would likely take years to curb the mosquito populations capable of spreading Zika — and before local populations gain enough immunity for the number of cases to fall.

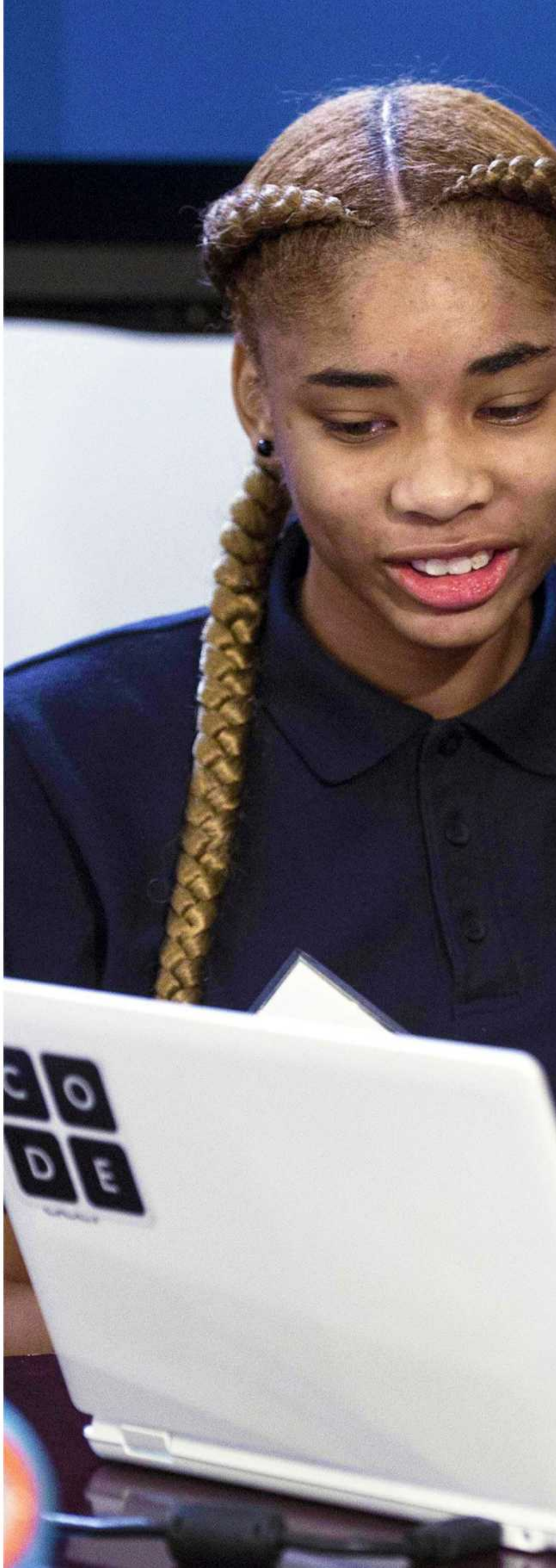
Jimmy Whitworth, an infectious diseases expert at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said we might soon see babies born elsewhere with malformed heads as the virus becomes entrenched in other countries.

"It could be that we're getting the strongest signal in Brazil," he said. "But having these cases occurring and pinning it to Zika is tough."

Whitworth said it was important for WHO to act quickly, despite the lack of definitive evidence that Zika is responsible for the surge in microcephaly cases.

"For situations like this, you have to essentially have a 'no regrets' policy," he said. "Maybe this will be a false alarm when more information is available months later, but it's serious enough on the evidence we have right now that we have to act."

OBAMA WANTS $4B TO HELP STUDENTS LEARN COMPUTER SCIENCE



President Barack Obama said Saturday he will ask Congress for billions of dollars to help students learn computer science skills and prepare for jobs in a changing economy.

“In the new economy, computer science isn’t an optional skill. It’s a basic skill, right along with the three R’s,” Obama said in his weekly radio and Internet address.

Obama said only about one-quarter of K-12 schools offer computer science instruction, but that most parents want their children to develop analytical and coding skills.


C O
D E

"Today's auto mechanics aren't just sliding under cars to change the oil. They're working on machines that run on as many as 100 million lines of code," Obama said. "That's 100 times more than the Space Shuttle. Nurses are analyzing data and managing electronic health records. Machinists are writing computer programs."

The federal budget proposal for 2017 that Obama plans to send Congress on Feb. 9 will seek $4 billion for grants to states and $100 million for competitive grants for school districts over the next three years to teach computer science in elementary, middle and high schools, administration officials said.

Separately, the National Science Foundation and the Corporation for National and Community Service this year will start spending $135 million to train teachers over five years.

Obama said also wants governors, mayors, business leaders and tech entrepreneurs to become advocates for more widespread computer science education.

Brad Smith, president of Microsoft, said computer science education is an "economic and social imperative for the next generation of American students."

Smith, who spoke on a media call arranged by the White House, said that up to a million U.S. technology jobs could be left unfilled by the end of the decade. Meanwhile, countries as large as China and as small as Estonia are expanding computer science education, Smith said, but in the U.S. "we're moving, frankly, just more slowly than we need."

Online:

Obama's address: **http://tinyurl.com/js9ssod**





Image: © Thomas Mukoya / Reuters


SAMSUNG



COURT: CHEMICALS CAUSED SAMSUNG CHIP WORKER'S OVARIAN CANCER

A court said Friday that exposure to carcinogens at a Samsung chip factory caused a worker's ovarian cancer in the first ruling in South Korea to link the disease with chemicals that chip workers were exposed to.

The Seoul Administrative Court said it saw a "significant causal relationship" between the disease and even a low level of toxic chemicals because the worker Lee Eun-joo was exposed to carcinogens over a long period.

SAMSUNG

공개사과하라
재발방지대책
마련하라
합당하게보상하라

함께



Lee died in 2012 after battling ovarian cancer for more than a decade. She worked at a Samsung chip factory for six years since 1993 when she was 17.

The court said the glues that Lee used to put a silicon wafer on a lead frame contained formaldehyde, a known carcinogen, and phenol, a known promotor of tumors, according to its material safety data sheets.

The court also blamed many night shifts and the factory's ventilation system. It ordered a government agency to compensate her family.

The court also said the agency should be less stringent in deciding eligibility for compensation when the cause of the disease is not completely clear cut.

In South Korea, a government agency levies companies and oversees insurance for workers with occupational diseases.

Banolim, an advocacy group, says it has details of more than 200 current or former Samsung workers suffering from grave diseases such as leukemia. Of them, 76 have died. Less than a dozen cases had a causal relationship recognized by courts or the government.

Samsung recently agreed on preventive measures but remains deadlocked over other issues after many workers opposed the company's compensation plan announced last year.

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